

LEARNING FROM INFORMAL COMMUNITY IN BANGKOK

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Abstract

This is the 3rd year architectural studio project running with the pilot concept of Work Integrated Learning (WIL), giving the opportunity for students to work with real people or client. As such an old urban community of Nanglerng in inner Bangkok was selected as the 'Live' project. The students had to work with the community within two months period and in the end they proposed the design for the community. A part of the area of the old abandoned school within the community was the main design problem, where they had to work with community people, with the urban and historical context. Fieldworks, workshops, interviews, questionnaires, and discussions in small group were tested in the studio. Through the community participation in some of the phase, the resulted design proposal did give some concrete outcome and thus architecture could be the tool in community development and remaking of the community.

1 Introduction

Students are given an urban community in old historic part of inner Bangkok - Nanglerng Community as the study area. The community has gone through a

gradual change over the past decades and begins to lose its character. Also with new mode of urban lifestyle, community people tend to lose their connectivity. So it is an important task to rethink and remake the community meeting place, so that once again people could come to meet, learn and share their values in life.

1.1 Nanglerng Community - site and context

Nanglerng community dated back about two hundred years ago, lie towards east of the inner historic core of Bangkok. There are living heritage and culture regarding the local food, desserts, art and historical architecture. It houses three big interconnected communities and our focus community is Wat Kae Nanglerng community (sit beside a Buddhist temple) with three different types of land occupancy, i.e.: privately own, the temple and the Crown Property Bureau (CPB). So as city evolved the settlement on the Wat Kae temple and CPB's land was more congested, resulting slum and more of informal housing had taken place. The community share the temple spaces to have its meeting place and other public activity. Thus any changes or development in the area, all the stakeholders, especially both the

tenants and landlords must be in the process and mutually agreed. Today, the modern Nanglerng community coping with the new city development and culture, with the social capital of the past remain for its future adaptation. The community also picked up tools and techniques in strengthening themselves and came forward to a point, but there is a lot do as a whole.

1.2 WIL Architecture Studio –This Work Integrated Learning is also a new concept applying in a 3rd year studio at School of Architecture and Design, King Mongkuts’ University of Technology Thonburi. The studio would allow the students to have the real working experience with the client, in this case the community (tenants) and the landowner (CPB). The design problem thus is something on ground and would benefit the real client in the end.

We are altogether a team of 5 colleagues as studio instructors (2 full-timers and other 3 practicing architects as part-timers) with 33 students working on the given site of existing abandoned primary school (Chareon-sueksa school) in Nanglerng community. The school lays behind the heritage row houses within the given area of 1,300 sq.m., and at the moment function as a private car parking spaces. The task was to keep the existing old wooden 2-storey building with 10 classrooms, which could be renovated and proposed with new proposal for the redesign of the school space according to the prospective users and community requirements. This new meeting place will open up the new space for both the local people and passerby, also the alternative tourists. The

community could use this space for multi-purpose, informal education program, art activity and play area for young and meeting area for the elders. There is a sensitive issue concerning the school occupancy, between the existing tenant and the CPB, also in this case, the community would like to ask for the use of the school space and manage by the community themselves.

2 Learning outcomes:

1. Student learns how urban context (both tangible and intangible) could be translated into architectural spaces.
2. Student acquires hands-on skills and how to critically communicate ideas through drawings and models.
3. Student gains more understanding on community architecture, social engagement and participatory design process.
4. Student cultivates his/her critical thinking skill by practicing both spatial judgment as well as critical scrutiny.
5. Students could creatively response to programmatic, technical, legal as well as social and cultural context of practice.

3 Method

3.1 Preparation stage (before studio begins) 2 weeks time, both students and instructors.

-Community survey and field work.

-Understanding the community and context.

-Possible sites were surveyed, with the site of abandoned primary school selected.

3.2 Studio period (2 months time)

1. Five groups (6-7 students) were divided with one instructor to carry out Assignment 1 on initial research about the community. Site/context and users were analyzed, and program proposal with video presentation were expected.
2. Guest lectures on Community Architecture and mini-documentary tutorial were given as background at studio.
3. Group meeting and discussion amongst each group to develop questions for community. Working with community is an emphasis here as to hit the exact problem and get the suitable program.
4. Interview and consultation with community (both leader and members) by students.
5. Children day activity - to organize an event for kids in the community and as a starting point of getting to know more each other.
6. Pre-pin up with two SOA+D colleagues and group instructors.
7. Pin up 1: Research conclusion and Program Proposal (on site) to the community and staff of CPB, with feedback from peers and adjustment for 'Design Problem'.
8. Individual design work for Assignment 2, with studio critics each week, this allows each

student developing their own collaborative learning discussion with community. Hand-drawing were the main tools along with model making. Students are not allowed to use computer program for making drawing. Hands-on skills were emphasis, as well as presentation techniques.

9. Pin up 2: Assessment on design development. Instructors commented on schemes and presentation skills.
10. Presentation preparation stage. Students prepare the final work individually.
11. Final presentation of design proposal - in the morning the students presented to guest architects, and in the afternoon presented to the representative of the community at the studio. Comments and feedback were given in depth by both architects and community people.
12. Selected works were presented to the CPB three weeks after the final presentation.

4 Evaluation of the project

The project would be evaluated as follows:

- The students would evaluate according to their understanding and outcome on Likert scale (ranging from 0 to 5), with comments.
- Instructors would evaluate the skills and final design according to school grading system.
- Guest architects and critics would evaluate the skills and

final design according to school grading system.

- Clients would provide comments and feedback on students' final presentation.

5 Discussion: what we have learnt about the 'Live' project?

- Both the students and community gain better understanding on each other, role and future responsibility.
- The community at certain point is not sure or unclear at what they want, and most of the time would like to have all the 'good' things. This sometimes makes the requirement too demanding and too confusing for the student to design. So, in order to achieve a more strong and efficient design, the program and requirement could be more refined. But we learnt that our role is to make them more clear and decisive.
- Architecture could be a useful tools in making people getting together to talk and exchange ideas. Thus it could be useful tool as a starting point in changing their environment.
- We also learnt that the community had so much of local wisdom and high potential, but the local authority should provide a more suitable way for the development.
- Participation was the key factor, even though not all the members did, but many of

them gave input in the meeting and interview.

6 Conclusions

Surprisingly most of the students did very well in the project, and seemed to like this kind of real project too. They found it fun and exciting when talking and interview with the people in the community. They did gain some skill in communicating and presentation, especially in the phase of program proposal in a 3-5 minutes documentary, the students did went through good level of both technical and content. The students felt that this kind of real project is a good experience for them, to realize and concern on the real problem in everyday life in contemporary city. Some of them also felt that this kind of project make them 'talked' with people, which is very important as they had to really take a good care how the design will affect the people lifestyle, thus making the student felt like a more 'matured' designer.

The community also reflected well, gave positive comment and straightforward. They really appreciated the students' effort and would really love to see the project be realized in the near future. They also learnt a lot and rethink amongst themselves what they really want, and learnt other communication skill, also be more aware of their social capital and heritage. Young people in the community also began aiming at a higher education; this makes a small change in their attitude too. Different ideas and perspectives were exchanged and discussed during the meeting and presentation. This make more positive and advantage for community empowerment.

The land owner- CPB, also received our students' work well and would like to continue this kind of mutual benefit. They did give feedbacks that were very helpful for the learning experience of the project, though they still feel that some adjustment might be needed if the design would be realized. Debated issues were around the 'rights' to the occupancy of the school, and the CPB people were still skeptical on the community driven management.

The studio instructors were quite satisfied with the project, and we thought that it was quite a successful project. Even though there was a bit of weariness during the last lap of the project. Details and some of architectural design need to be more taken care and put in. The students did very well during the intensive field works and research, thus delivered back much synthesized programs for the community. At the stage, when 'architectural design problem' was given on the individual work, some of them lost a few points regarding the participatory design process, and acclaimed a more traditional architect's role- design for the sake of architecture. They wasted some time testing some floating ideas, but in the end, they retrieved and did give a more sensitive and modest design. They did great presentation and could catch hold the essence of the project. Overall, I think that the students, and this studio, learnt a lot from this community project. As academic institution, we should encourage more of this domain with real project as such, and keep supporting this good atmosphere, so that they could become a more practical and useful architect in the

future. Yes, we also need to adjust some stage and content of the design requirement, but it was a good try. I hope that this will be continuing in our school and in our profession.

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