

THE CENTRAL EMBASSY IN BANGKOK

A new icon of the West in the East?

Current realities have promoted a migration of charismatic artists. Wojciech Kosinski notes that, in a way, it has created a global colonisation – “an export in the creation of skyscrapers from the West to the East”¹⁾ – which results in the shift of the leading centres of the skyscrapers construction to the Middle and Far East.”²⁾ In the aftermath of the rapid development and urbanisation of Asia, the demand for tall architecture has significantly increased. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon is the city of Dubai, where the newly erected buildings have changed the city’s skyline. The same has happened in other cities, where modern, tall buildings exist either alongside traditional buildings, or have replaced them completely.

High-rise buildings first appeared on a large scale in the United States. Although they had also started to appear in Latin America (Sao Paulo, Santiago, Caracas, Bogota and Mexico City) since the early 1930s, it is Asia that has dominated this area: for instance the cities of Tokyo, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taipei, as well as the city in question – Bangkok. Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, is a rapidly growing metropolis, and the 22nd most populous city in the world. It is also an extremely diverse city where traditional, multi-storey buildings neighbour closely with districts dominated by contemporary architecture. Even taller buildings are rising along the main public transport lines, which has made huge cranes a new landmark of the city’s landscape. High edifices seem to grow out of surprising places, out of context, and cause even more

¹⁾ Kosiński (2009: 7–43).

²⁾ Setkowicz (2010: 103–118).

chaos – which seems to be a typical trait of Bangkok’s architecture. Such is the nature of the new commercial and office centre located near Ratchadamri, Phaya Thai and Rama I, which is blanketed with skyscrapers and modern malls. The TH Yaowarat district, which formerly housed a poultry farm, is now one of the largest shopping centres and a precious metals trading centre. Buildings erected in this district include the first Bangkok skyscrapers,³⁾ among them the renovated and recently expanded 22-storey Dusit Thani Hotel.⁴⁾

According to grand declarations, the Central Embassy building – under construction since 2010 – is to be one of the most interesting and modern architectural constructions.⁵⁾ The expected success of the building, already labelled as a new symbol of Bangkok, is due to the innovative nature of the project. From the very outset, the project aroused great interest. In addition to information provided by the project architects and investors already in December 2010, the project was mentioned in many newspapers and magazines including “World Architecture News”.⁶⁾ Also, the location chosen for the construction of the Central Embassy offers undoubtedly a distinct advantage. This great shopping and hotel complex is being built in the place of the former gardens of the British Embassy by the Nai Lert Park, at the intersection of two major urban thoroughfares – Wireless and Ploenchit Road.⁷⁾ The new edifice will be connected to the neighbouring building of Central Chidlom by a special bridge. Moreover, the Central Embassy will be in the vicinity of a number of hotels, shopping centres and apartment buildings. The proximity of Sukhumvit⁸⁾ (the longest shopping street), Sathorn⁹⁾ (with numerous luxury hotels) and Silom¹⁰⁾ (the most important financial district) offers a convenient location.

³⁾ Burke, Bush (2010: 41, 60, 94, 101).

⁴⁾ O’Neil (2008). The hotel complex was recently extended and renovated.

⁵⁾ The completion of the building was originally announced for 2013, but the investor already set a later date in 2014 <http://www.amandalevetearchitects.com/portfolio/bangkok-central-embassy/?nofade=1> online 15.05.2012.

⁶⁾ *Face to face*, http://www.worldarchitecturenews.com/index.php?fuseaction=wanappln.projectview&upload_id=15488 23 Dec 2010.

⁷⁾ <http://www.centralembassy.com/location.php> online 15.05.2012.

⁸⁾ The longest street in Bangkok, with a number of shopping centres, cafes, tourist’s attractions and many hotels.

⁹⁾ A rapidly growing street and the district with the same name, connected by the skytrain, with many luxury hotels and apartment buildings.

¹⁰⁾ The most important financial district.

In March 2009¹¹⁾, the project was officially entrusted to AL_A, a London-based architectural studio officially founded by Amanda Leveté earlier that year. Thus it was an incredible success for the young studio.

Leveté has become a world-known architect after the success that she had achieved together with the late Jan Kaplický in the Future Systems studio. Future Systems was founded by Kaplický in 1979 and led by him until his death in 2009.¹²⁾ Their most famous works include the Selfridges building in Birmingham and the Lord's Media Centre in London. In 2008, Leveté left Future Systems to set up her own architectural office AL_A, which was successful in winning a competition to design a new gallery for the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.¹³⁾ She has succeeded in what was denied to Daniel Libeskind, who prepared a plan for the restoration of the museum.¹⁴⁾ She became an authority in the field of architecture and design as proven by invitations to sit on the jury of many competitions including "Designs of the year" and the AIANY Design Awards 2013. She also conducts lectures at British universities, and is often interviewed for current architectural and design trends. On receipt of the project in Bangkok, Leveté admitted "I've never worked in Asia before (...) In Bangkok, labour is cheap but technology is expensive, so we designed something that responds to the socio-economic conditions there"¹⁵⁾ says Leveté. She emphasised that the extraordinary form that will be given to this building will probably make it a new icon of the metropolis.

The importance of having such a facility is shown by the example of Bilbao. This Spanish city, the provincial capital of Biscay, was searching for ways to restore its importance and interest, which it had lost to other Spanish cities. It managed to recover thanks to an extraordinary building housing the Guggenheim Museum, designed by Frank O. Gehry (1993–1997). The building has had a significant impact on the city's fate, reviving it and attracting thousands

¹¹⁾ Hensel, Sungurogl Hensel, Teras (2010: 112–113).

¹²⁾ Gerc (2011).

¹³⁾ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/mar/28/v-and-a-35m-plans> online 30.04.2012.

¹⁴⁾ On Libeskind's project for VAM: What does Leveté think of Libeskind's plan? "It was iconic, but the time for iconic buildings has passed." Leveté met the V&A's new brief by producing a subtler, indeed scarcely perceptible, piece of architecture than Libeskind's strutting, jutting extension, one she argues will create an "iconic space rather than be an iconic building" interview Stuart Jeffries, "The Guardian", Saturday 9 April 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2011/apr/09/amanda-levete-architecture-practice> online 10.04.2012.

¹⁵⁾ Jonathan Glancey, *Amanda Leveté: to infinity and beyond*, in: "The Guardian", Sunday 11 October 2009 21.50 BST".

of tourists. This success paved the way for other ambitious projects.¹⁶⁾ This phenomenon was even given a name and is referred to as the *Bilbao effect*.

Perhaps this influenced the decision of the Central Board, which wanted its new headquarters to attract the attention of crowds. An even greater success for Future Systems architects was choosing Amanda Levete. The building in Birmingham aroused great interest among architects, residents and numerous city visitors. Selfridges became an icon of Bullring in Birmingham. Entrusting the project to Levete seemed to have been particularly appropriate, since the architectural success turned into a commercial triumph for the British retail chain Selfridges.

The 1.5 million sq ft project will occupy the area of the former gardens of the British Embassy by Nai Lert Park, and will consist of a 7-storey retail podium and a 30-storey 6-star hotel tower. Its total area amounts to 145 000 m², of which 35 000 m² will be occupied by the hotel, 70 000 m² by the shopping centre, while the remaining 40 000 m² is left for a parking lot. It has been under construction since 2010, and according to plans it should have been completed by 2013. However, it was still not ready in February 2014. In May 2014, the lower part – the mall – was opened. This is how “The Bangkok Magazine” described it: “Central Embassy is Bangkok’s first ever ultra-luxury lifestyle mall, boasting an impressive collection of high-end designer stores, fine-dining restaurants, swanky cinema screens, and an extravagant six-star hotel. Built on the grounds of the former British Embassy – hence the name – this 18 billion baht mega-mall projects the capital’s status even further as one of the world’s leading shopping destinations”¹⁷⁾.

As in Birmingham, the investor is a retailer – Central Group established in 1927. Its founder was a native of China, Nitiang Chirathivat. He began from a modest shop in the vicinity of Thonburi in Bangkok, but later developed his business into a large corporation.¹⁸⁾ Currently, Central is a recognised brand in Thailand, occupying a prominent place in the Asian market. Their success has been honoured with several awards, including the prestigious GIA (Global Innovator Award) and an award from Retail Asia Magazine for the flagship store in downtown Bangkok. The network currently has nine stores in Bangkok and one each in Chiang-Mai, Hadyai, Phuket and Pattaya.

¹⁶⁾ Jencks (2005).

¹⁷⁾ <http://www.bangkok.com/magazine/central-embassy.htm> online 20.06.2014, the upper part – hotel, is still under construction.

¹⁸⁾ <http://www.centralretail.com/> online 23.10.2011.

As announced by investors and architects involved in the project on the former embassy grounds, the new building is to become the most recognisable of all commercial and hotel buildings. Investors ensured to attract future customers and the public long before the project had even been completed. They launched a modern website devoted to the venture, hired a designer famous for her unconventional ideas, and catered for media attention not only in Asia, but also in Europe. Leveté also states that “The Central Embassy will be the first contemporary landmark building in Bangkok. It is demonstrably of its time, but rooted in Thai heritage and culture”. Leveté says – “Our architectural ambition is matched by the ambition of Central to create the best and most exciting retail and hotel destination in Thailand”¹⁹⁾.

After watching multimedia presentations and analysing the model closely, one can understand the author’s confidence in the uniqueness of the project. The body of the building is the combination of two cuboids. The base consists of a rectangular structure with longer walls lying horizontally against the applied rectangular structure standing vertically. These blocks were digitally processed to achieve an effect of constant motion. By applying methods used in mechanical physics, the walls were given a streamlined shape in order to minimise air resistance. The project logo resembles a lemniscate which can be found in the shape of the building blocks. This is particularly evident in the ascending line of the tower, which wraps up the building to form the shape of a lemniscate. These dynamics are aggravated by the deflection of the tower. Its curvilinear forms turn around each other, forming a kind of well in the middle. Through its spiral drawing, it appears to be in constant motion. Similar to the shape of the number eight, the spiral spin of the tower allows for two of these “wells”²⁰⁾. Thus the two empty internal spaces are also important functionally as they can be used to provide light to the interior spaces of the building.

Through the results of various experiments, the building is situated close to the elongated rectangle with beveled, rounded, opposing corners. Successive floors overlap, wherein in each of these floors modifications have been introduced. In the basement, these modifications were forced by the stately shaped entryway that is recessed from the building’s facade. The areas here are suited to a large number of guests, which is particularly evident in the third and fourth floors, which are connected to a Skytrain station. The horizontal displacement, whose predominant aim is to mitigate a shake effect, is also to gain extra space

¹⁹⁾ Leveté (2009).

²⁰⁾ http://www.archdaily.com/97194/central-embassy-al_a/ online 24.10.2011.

for development. On the non-uniform (diversified) horizontal zones achieved by smooth transitions, planed terraces provide greenery that should become decorative, hanging gardens, which are expected to give privacy to this huge edifice, largely maintained in a cold futuristic style.

The project of the edifice, through its oval shape, resembles a sculpture rather than a building. Its form combines the two elements resulting in a static platform extending over a width of 200 metres. Its height, formed by stacking up several floors with different contours, gradually extends outward from the body so that one of its sides flanks it, turning into a slim, expressively curving tower. The glazed surfaces of the elevations are interspersed with cavities covered with aluminium “scales” arranged to give the surfaces additional texture. Furthermore, each of the scales also has its own profile. This profile, combined with additional lighting, provides the look of an opalescent facade which highlights the scales, giving a greater impression of movement, and a greater three-dimensional character. As Leveté explains, “The distribution of tiles creates a moiré-like pattern, articulated by the play of light and reflection along the surfaces of these varying profiles. This rich and stimulating pattern visually emphasises the wrapping form of the building as well as providing scale and texture to the extensive opaque frontage at podium level. All glazed areas are designed to merge seamlessly with the aluminium skin”²¹). As in Birmingham’s Selfridges, there are no right angle corners or sharp edges. Such a solution gives the whole structure a more dynamic form.

Preparations for this undertaking required the cooperation of many specialists: the project manager – Alvin Huang, the project assistant – Alice Dietsch, AL_A office staff: Alex Bulygin, Peter Feldmann, Chris Geneste, Naoki Kotaka, Cyril Manyara, Jakob Pryzblo, Tanya Rainsley, Irene Shamma, Joy Natapa Sriyusiri and Claudia White. The on-site consultant in Bangkok is Pi Design; MITR is responsible for the engineering, Davis Langdon Seah dealt with the structural engineering, and Scott Wilson supervised the construction work.

When mentioning the project preparations, Alvin Huang, Project Director, and Amanda Leveté emphasised the importance of the study which had been undertaken before the work started. On the one hand, they studied traditional construction methods and architecture in Thailand, as well as gaining experience in high-tech and digital techniques. During this period, their modelling knowledge combined hand sketches with digital drawings to provide an innova-

²¹) http://www.archdaily.com/97194/central-embassy-al_a/ online 20.06.2014.

tive synthesis of technology and cultural heritage specific to Bangkok.²²⁾ In the official press release provided to the English press, the designers declared that the building form marks a grand gesture for the city, as the curved mass climbs high into the sky creating an identifying mark for the area.²³⁾ An interesting aspect of this project is that the form separates the programmed functions, the hotel's facade overlooks a peaceful garden by Nai Lert Park, while the hotel bar, reception and main terrace, the Sky Terrace, offer a view on to the lights of the city centre.

The multidimensional, smooth elevation was composed with aspects of traditional Thai architecture, according to the creators, but it seems to have been more inspired by modern Western European sculpture. Changes in the angle of inclination and rotation are designed to attract attention and invite visitors.²⁴⁾ The creators wanted, as is often emphasised, to reinterpret Thai heritage and culture and combine it with a modern context.²⁵⁾ However, before completion of the construction, it is difficult to assess if these goals will be realised.

Using the latest digital technology for the design allowed for a true freedom of forms, which creates a dynamic, attractive silhouette, whereby the building possesses a unique sculptural shape. The continuous movement of gleaming walls served as a canvas for architectural expression. In this way, the creators wish to draw the observer to interact. As shown in the project currently underway, it is obvious that many of these innovations owe their inspiration to the Selfridges building in Birmingham. In Bangkok, the form of the edifice has become even more dynamic, hectic, ascending and restless. Spirals create an extra depth and give the building a multi-dimensional character. Like in the Selfridges building, they decided upon an unvarying, glossy, attractive design elevation with a smooth but busy shape. The facing of the Central Embassy also brings to mind those of Birmingham, but here, the round aluminium discs from Selfridges have been transformed into rectangular scales. Portions without them are covered with glass panes. This allows the lighting of future apartments and hotel rooms, selected parts of the shopping centre, and most of all the main entrance.

²²⁾ <http://www.amandalevetearchitects.com/news/> online 20.06.2014.

²³⁾ <http://www.amandalevetearchitects.com/news/> online 20.06.2014.

²⁴⁾ Drawing on motifs and patterns found in traditional Thai architecture, the facade of the building is composed of a dynamic and fluid three-dimensional array of ceramic tiles. <http://www.amandalevetearchitects.com>.

²⁵⁾ <http://www.amandalevetearchitects.com/news/> online 20.06.2014.

Interiors merge seamlessly into the spacious, open spaces of common areas, deployed centrally. The more secluded areas tailor to the needs of retail stores, which will ultimately be located primarily along the facade.

As mentioned earlier, additional natural light was obtained by a vertical area open along all floors of the retail zone creating light wells inside the curling towers. These are processed elements of traditional construction, and could be considered the soul – an empty space inside of the stairwell between flights of stairs. The way in which they have been developed here gives the interior a modern character.

Many elements of the interior from the shopping centre in Bangkok are reminiscent of the solutions used in Selfridges, both in Birmingham as well as Manchester. Rounded shapes, repeated on each floor, and subdued colours suitable for futuristic interior styling, as perfectly integrated into the British shopping centres, have once again been adapted for the architectural needs of the Eastern investor.

The success of the British branch of retail chain Selfridges has given an impulse to design commercial buildings departing from established routines of architectural structures that Kaplicky called boxes.²⁶⁾ So arose the western icons, which shall have aspects of their design and development transferred to the East.

This extremely attractive design can allow this reproducible object to appear in a number of today's most recognisable architectural structures in Bangkok, such as the Robot Building erected in 1986 (now less noticeable among many much taller buildings around), the Elephant Tower from 1997, the Suvarnabhumi Airport completed in 2005, the Murphy Jahn project or the Bangkok Art and Culture centre from 2007–2008 (designed by RGB Architects), the Met completed in 2009, (designed by WOHA Designs), and the River in 2011 (designed by Raimon Land, Steven Leach) for Raimon Land. In the vicinity of the Central Embassy are Centara Grand which draws attention with its unique capstone illuminated at night by changing coloured lights and the Baiyoke Tower, a very popular tourist attraction which offers a view on the city from the 77th floor. There are of course many more, but it is impossible to list all the noteworthy places in a metropolis like Bangkok.

Perhaps the opportunities discovered and applied by Fazlur Khan in the construction of skyscrapers, combined with the latest digital technology would

²⁶⁾ Jan Kaplicky, "Where is written that buildings have to be boxes? People are not boxes." – Kaplickys sentence quoted in the majority of studies on him or and his work.

astound the constructor. He started the transformation of the building structure with the use of the digital technology, which can turn a monumental building into an unusual and functional sculpture. The question remains whether the Central Embassy Bangkok will become an icon. Did the authors derive experience and inspiration from the building of the Selfridges in Birmingham to prepare for the Asian investor an object as successful as the original? A question that seems very difficult to answer is whether this will rejuvenate the commercial interests of Central and attract curious customers. Owing to the form it was given, it certainly stands a great chance of rejuvenating the architectural trademark of the retailer.

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Fig. 1. Central Embassy in Bangkok – view from the northern side (February 2014)



Fig. 2. Central Embassy in Bangkok – view from the sky train station (February 2014)



Fig. 3. Central Embassy in Bangkok – final work on the elevation



Fig. 4. Baiyoke Tower II



Fig. 5. Centara Grand near Central World in Bangkok (during the day)



Fig 6. Centara Grand near Central World in Bangkok (at night)