

POERSONAL REFLECTION

By Nausica Castanas

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When you apply for a position with a choice of location, it is natural to have a preference. When I applied for the DPU/ACHR/CAN Young Professionals Programme, the options were Manila and Bangkok. And while both locations and organisations seemed extremely interesting, I was hoping to be sent to Bangkok. I thought that my profile was a closer fit to the Philippines since the focus was on mapping, which I had more experience with.

Unexpectedly, I was placed in Bangkok, to work at Openspace, a community architects studio working across Thailand. I felt lucky but, in retrospect, I didn't fully realise just how lucky.

I had some experience in community projects, and using participatory approaches to research, but I had no previous experience with architecture. I therefore expected to be challenged. And challenged I was!

In my six months at Openspace, I had to deal with an unremittingly heavy workload, typically juggling different projects at the same time. The priorities would shift quite often, which required me to always be flexible with my work. The language barrier remained until the end of my stay, Thai being a particularly difficult language to pick up.

I had to learn how to take a back seat to certain activities, since interacting directly with communities was not always an option, especially given time limitations. I would therefore prepare questions and setting for a meeting or focus group, and then on the day rely on translations whenever there was a lull in discussions. This was a change of pace to what I was used to, and in its own way very informative.

I also worked out of my comfort zone: when projects were more design-based, my contributions were understandably limited.

In other ways however, this position matched very closely my own interests and wants. The workload was extremely varied. From helping in the production of a board game to community mapping to writing a research paper based on our work, there was never a dull day and very little repetition in my workdays.

I was lucky enough to participate in the 4th CAN Workshop in July 2016, which brought together community architects and practitioners from 15 Asian countries and community members from Chum Saeng, in Nakhon Sawan. It was a privilege to work alongside people from different backgrounds on hands on projects that brought noticeable results for the local community. I also attended the annual ACHR meeting, where participants presented the projects they have been working on and the ones they are hoping to get funded. Not only was it fascinating to hear, it

also gave me an insight into the larger picture of this field, like opening a door and peeking into a world that is not yet entirely mine.

The overall six-month experience also reaffirmed my will to work in this field as I find being involved in work I believe in extremely rewarding.

All the challenges and learning opportunities, however, pale in comparison to the human connections I have made. The people within the ACHR and CAN networks have all been incredible. The communities I worked with over the span of these six months have been tremendously welcoming. While my Thai is limited at best and I always require translation, which slows communication, the will of people to get to know me has been unrelenting and has made me feel extremely grateful. Sometimes it's a small gift, or a refusal to let me pay for food or drinks. Other times, it's questions and sitting through my scrambling for words. Others still, it's a smile or even a hug. These small gestures have been priceless, and speak volumes about the culture of hospitality that exists in this country.

Last but certainly not least, my team at Openspace far surpassed my expectations. In Thailand, hierarchy can be extremely rigid. Subordinates or younger people cannot voice their opinions too openly or in a straightforward manner, as it is construed as rude. At Openspace, I have found a horizontal platform of communication, where everyone's opinions are valued. Certain big decisions are taken by Ploy, the lead architect and manager, but everyone, including myself, can have a say.

More importantly, Batan, Jeed, Bat, Fon and Ploy made sure I felt welcome since the day I arrived, in ways both big and small that have not gone unnoticed.

Following this programme, I have been offered the opportunity to stay with the team and continue working at Openspace. As I said, I fully expected to be challenged during the internship. What I didn't expect was to find a home.

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