

Lucien Steil

Chiang Mai Workshop in Traditional Architecture and Urbanism

Taller de arquitectura y urbanismo tradicionales en Chiang Mai

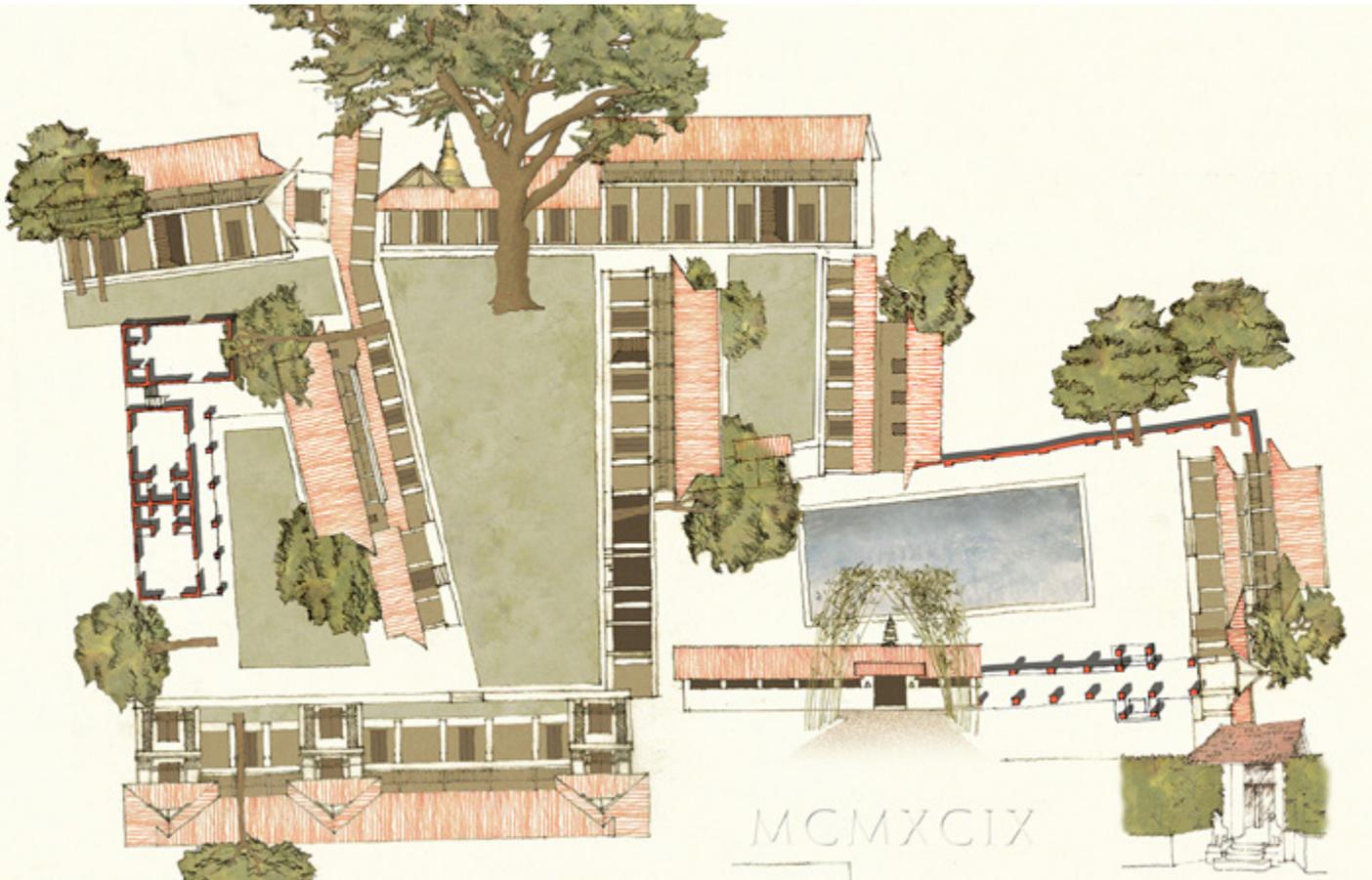
Workshop sobre a arquitetura e urbanismo tradicionais de Chiang Mai

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

This workshop was initiated by the Thai architects Ong-ard Satrabhandhu and Purisa Nimmanahaeminda and brought together some 30 students from Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University with their professors Pirast Pacharaswate and Sayanee Virochrut. A three-day workshop, with an educational charrette on traditional architecture and urbanism, was led by Professor Lucien Steil from the University of Notre Dame. Besides investigating and practicing the toolkit of the legendary *Beaux-Arts* pedagogy, consisting of in-situ urban and architectural sketching, observational and gesture drawings, the use of *analytique*, the production of an *esquisse*, etc., the participants learned about *capriccio* drawings as well as experimenting with pastel and charcoal on tone paper. The workshop offered a comprehensive immersion into the work of Ong-ard Architects, the oeuvre of which was the background and inspiration for a rewarding didactic adventure.

Este taller surgió como una iniciativa de los arquitectos tailandeses Ong-ard Satrabhandhu y Purisa Nimmanahaeminda, y en él participaron unos 30 estudiantes de la Chulalongkorn University de Bangkok junto a sus profesores Pirast Pacharaswate y Sayanee Virochrut. El taller se desarrolló durante tres días, con una *charrette* sobre arquitectura y urbanismo tradicionales, bajo la dirección del profesor Lucien Steil de la Universidad de Notre Dame. Además de investigar y practicar con las herramientas de la legendaria pedagogía *Beaux-Arts* (que consiste en realizar bocetos de arquitectura y urbanismo sobre el terreno, dibujos de observación y gestuales, el uso de la *analytique*, la producción de un boceto, etc.), los participantes aprendieron sobre el dibujo de caprichos y experimentaron con pastel y carboncillo sobre papel. En el taller se ofreció una inmersión completa en la obra de Ong-ard Architects, que fue el telón de fondo y la inspiración de una gratificante aventura didáctica.

Esta oficina foi iniciada pelos arquitetos tailandeses Ong-ard Satrabhandhu e Purisa Nimmanahaeminda, e reuniu cerca de 30 estudantes da Universidade Chulalongkorn de Banguecoque, juntamente com os seus professores Pirast Pacharaswate e Sayanee Virochrut. Uma oficina de três dias, com uma *charrete* pedagógica sobre a arquitetura e urbanismo tradicionais, foi dirigida pelo Professor Lucien Steil da Universidade de Notre Dame. Para além de investigarem e praticarem o conjunto de ferramentas da lendária pedagogia *Beaux-Arts*, que consiste em esboços urbanos e arquitetónicos realizados no local, desenhos de observação e gestuais, a utilização do *analytique*, a produção de um *esquisse*, etc., os participantes aprenderam sobre os desenhos *capriccio*, bem como sobre a experimentação com pastel e carvão em papel colorido. A oficina possibilitou uma imersão completa na obra da Ong-ard Architects, que foi o contexto e a inspiração para uma aventura didática gratificante.



Drawing of Tamarind Village
(Ong-ard Satrabhandhu)

Prologue

“I am not trying to invent new things; I am just copying”, Thai architect Ong-ard Satrabhandhu told me in his soft-spoken, almost shy and yet assured manner, adding that he regards the obsession with ego as one of the most deleterious aspects of modern art and architecture. He travels widely to study, measure, and draw notable examples of historic architecture in Asia, Europe, and the US, and I was impressed to hear of his frequent trips to Japan, particularly Kyoto, as well as to China, India, etc., where he spends hours sketching and even drawing up construction details at 1:1 scale with his design team. Ong-ard also told me of his extensive international and transcultural design research in situ and in libraries and bookshops where he seeks out rare books and treatises; he treasures his manuscript documentation and measured drawings of urban layout, site conditions, etc., colored and detailed with annotations on materials, construction, and character. This precious information is at the base of most of his projects, in Thailand and elsewhere.

This design process along with its preliminaries yields highly accomplished results in terms of composition, form, style, detail, character, etc. and far transcends what is usually understood by “copying”, or even “imitation”. The process recalls the scientific rigor and observational intelligence of an anthropologist or botanist, combined with the improvisation of a jazz musician or the meditative approach of a calligraphy painter. One could also compare it to the way nature would operate if it were the architect. It would indeed use general and abstract principles of “imitation”, the “most updated knowledge about the universe” (as eloquently put by Hassan Fathy) and the characteristics of time and place, climate, people, etc. to make buildings, towns, and cities which endure beautifully and serve communities, life, and nature.

Isn't this what the humanists called *inventio*, or what Mircea Eliade (1987) means when he says that “Creation is the repetition of the original Creation”? And isn't it that by “repeating the original creation” one achieves “originality”?



Entrance to Rachamankha Hotel, Chiang Mai, Thailand (Ong-ard Architects)



One Nimman market hall, Chiang Mai, Thailand (Ong-ard Architects)

Though Ong-ard typically avoids intellectualizing his work and the usual academic and professional patterns of critique and analysis, both his work and its theoretical foundations seem complex and robust to me. His designs are sophisticated and cultivated, tangible and down to earth, and built and detailed to the highest standards of craftsmanship and art. He does not indulge in the opaque jargon dripping with analogy and allegory and fixated on contemporaneity, modernity, or nothingness, or frankly mostly nonsensical pseudo-philosophy that modern creators often hide their lack of substance behind. His work is on the contrary a work of “substance” rooted in architecture as the “art of building”. His architecture is about building beautiful, comfortable, and durable places in the purest Vitruvian tradition, but also the “poetic expression of building and tectonics”, as Léon Krier says (Porphyrios 1984).



Model of One Nimman, Chiang Mai, Thailand (Ong-ard Architects)

Ong-ard avoids superlatives in defining his objectives and achievements. He does not seek to change the world or to better mankind; he prefers to concentrate on work well done and delivered with high ethical and professional standards, like a traditional artisan builder. His work is not a “discourse”, “narrative”, or “statement” about our history, culture, or world but rather the humble and intelligent practice of “building and dwelling”, where both *genius loci* and *Zeitgeist* are natural existential conditions.

1: Casa Isolani (13th century), Bologna (Wikimedia Commons)

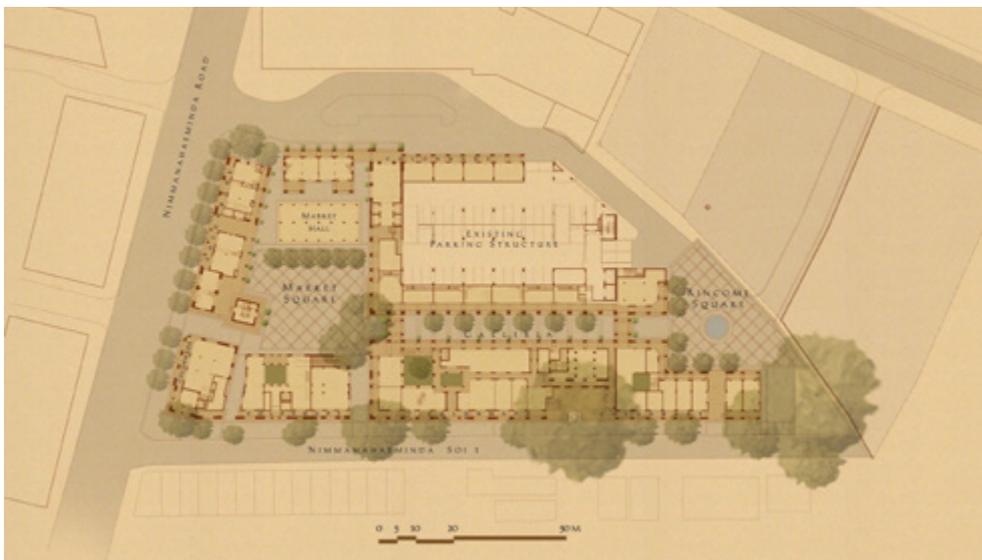
2: One Nimman building inspired by Casa Isolani (Ong-ard Architects)

Ong-ard’s assessment of ego may stem from two sources, one being the temptation of “self-expression” that any artist in any century may have felt, and the second lying in Buddhist philosophy,





One Nimman development, Chiang Mai, Thailand (Ong-ard Architects)



Ground-floor plan of the One Nimman complex (Ong-ard Architects)

which rejects the existence of the self. “From the Buddhist perspective, the idea of ‘individual self’ is an illusion. It is not possible to separate self from its surroundings” (Oh 2021).

On the subject of ego and self we may recall an interesting thought by Mathieu Enard (2017), who in *Compass* writes that “identity arises when the self meets the other”, a notion also expressed by L. S. Vygotsky (1980): “Through others we become ourselves”. So without denying the existence of an individual self, this view of identity as an “encounter between self and other” implies that the self is not a stable entity but rather a “becoming” or “evolving”. This might even bear out the Buddhist assumption of the self’s non-existence, for if there is no “identity” without the “self meeting the other”, the self must be ephemeral, in perpetual flux or transformation, constantly improvised.

On studying the architecture of Ong-ard and the way he processes his projects, one cannot but admire how this apparent paradox is convincingly articulated. The One Nimman urban ensemble features eloquent references to the Italian *piazza* as well as the French *place du marché* with its timber *halles*, the Italian *campanile* with the clock tower and the little civic tower enhancing the corner of the block, or the *portici* of Bologna and its iconic medieval Casa Isolani, and lastly the *galleria*, *galleries*, or *Passagen*, etc., ubiquitous in nineteenth-century urban typology as one finds elegantly fashioned in Brussels, London, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Milan, Naples, etc.



1: Street view of One Nimman, Chiang Mai, Thailand (Ong-ard Architects)

2: Public area of One Nimman, Chiang Mai, Thailand (Ong-ard Architects)

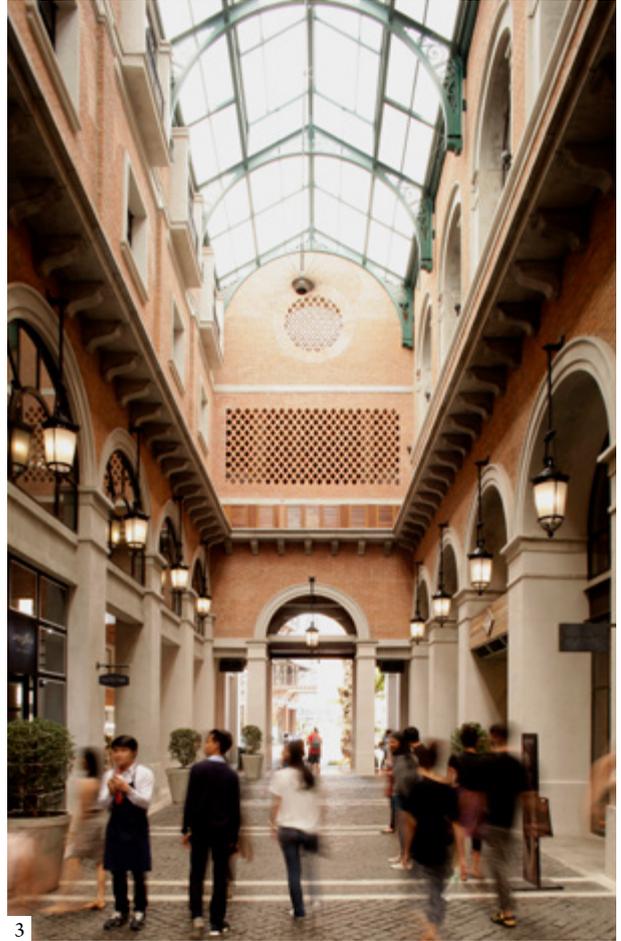
3: One Nimman *galleria*, Chiang Mai, Thailand (Ong-ard Architects)

4: One Nimman civic space, Chiang Mai, Thailand (Ong-ard Architects)

The complex, multi-layered composition with strong individualization of each building, fascinating scenography, and sensitive choreographic coordination seems to fulfill the medieval aesthetic ideal of unity in diversity. It may also be seen as a generic urban form, an *urbs* the identity of which results from the encounter of its self with the other. The sense of place and character materialized in One Nimman is nourished by a refined strategy of borrowing, quoting, copying, imitating, and recomposing from a wide repertoire of both vernacular and classical cultures, along with Ong-ard's remarkable sketchbooks.

The buildings settle organically and holistically into what one may see as an invigorated and enriched *genius loci*. One experiences One Nimman not as European exoticism in the *maniera italiana* or a playground of architectural vanity and ego but truly as a place which belongs to a universal culture of placemaking, with a rootedness in the local culture of civic life supporting a flourishing *urbs* and *civitas*.

Though Ong-ard's work is certainly marked by his autobiographical journey as much as that of architects and artists who tend to put their subjectivity at the heart of their oeuvre, he prefers the focus to be on what he designs. He does not wish his work to be anonymous or subdued but rather he sees himself as part of a cultural tradition in which artists and their creations merge in a realm where signatures and glory are irrelevant.





One Nimman market square, Ongard Architects, Chiang Mai, Thailand (François Hallard and Michael Freeman, Wikimedia Commons)

On Imitation, Origins and Originality

Léon Krier writes that “Architecture (*Arche-tectonike*) means literally ‘form of origin.’ If this definition is relevant for the architecture of any organism and structure, it is fundamental for Architecture as the Art of Building. It is not that the principles of Architecture reach into an immemorial past, but that their origin is forever present” (Porphyrios 1984). As Heidegger said: “Origin here means that from and by which something is what it is. What something is, as it is, we call its essence or nature. The origin of something is the source of its nature” (Heidegger 1971).

The first principle of imitation would thus be to study the originals – to study them as they are in their firstness, their unprecedented novelty, without regard to what followed. Nothing is more refreshing in times of confusion than going back to origins. Learning is always a quest for original knowledge: “The first step we have to make is to examine, if we are allowed the term, the genealogy and relation of our ideas, the causes that have given rise to them, and the characteristics that distinguish them: in a word, to return to the origin and generation of our knowledge” (D’Alembert 1751).

The Chiang Mai Workshop: *Capriccio, Analytique & Esquisse*

The workshop took place over three days in December 2018 at Hotel Rachamankha, an ensemble designed, built, and owned by Ong-ard Satrabhandhu, where he has his own practice with its fabulous architectural library. We were all graciously hosted by Ong-ard Architects and spent these three memorable days together sketching, visiting, lecturing, conversing, and designing. The students had not been previously exposed to traditional design and classical culture, whether in Thailand or abroad, but all showed a keen interest. Working within a culture I was not familiar with in a country and city I had never visited or studied and with people I barely knew, I still felt at ease; I also saw how good architecture and urbanism can be communicated and understood independently of national and religious affiliation, cultural tradition, or local building paradigms.

The three-day Chiang Mai workshop moved between the library and locations in Chiang Mai as we visited historic landmarks as well as the work of Ong-ard Architects, particularly One Nimman; the site for our Urban Architecture Design *esquisse* was at an adjacent corner. The detailed exploration and sketching experience at One Nimman was to prepare the students for a one-day urban design charrette.



Aerial view of Hotel Rachamankha, Chiang Mai, Thailand (Ong-ard Architects)



Designing in the company of good books in the Rachamankha library



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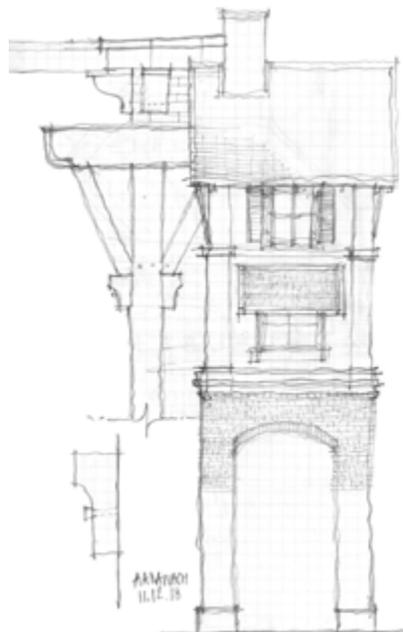


1: Architectural library at Hotel Rachamankha, Chiang Mai (Ong-ard Architects)

2: The Rachamankha library offered a refuge for discussion, drawing and design, as well as for rendering the final presentation plates. It was also used for short lectures on precedents, the *analytique* and the *esquisse*, key concepts of the Beaux-Arts design tradition (Pirast Pacharaswate)

3: Review of students' design work in the Hotel Rachamankha courtyard (Pirast Pacharaswate)

4: Happy times sketching with charcoal, pastel, and pencil in One Nimman square (Pirast Pacharaswate)



Zen and the Art of Sketching

Both Zen and sketching are techniques which can be taught and involve not virtuosity or talent but commitment and dedication. The drawing experience itself is considered as Zen or Chan, which means "meditation" and helps us gain direct and wholesome access into the complexity of ourselves and the universe. Knowledge and creative intuition derive from meditative and contemplative action and cognitive engagement with our built and natural environment, which can be developed through sketching and drawing.

Drawing and sketching are both "non-action" because they do not change the reality, and "action" because of the way they transform reality by inspiring and elevating us to enlightened citizenship and humanity, as well as enhancing our skills and knowledge. They also empower us to better see,

1: Exploring and sketching at One Nimman, Chiang Mai, Thailand (Ong-ard architects)

2: Outdoor sketching at Hotel Rachamankha (Pirast Pacharaswate)

3: Review of capriccio sketches in the Hotel Rachamankha courtyard (Pirast Pacharaswate)

feel, and think. They require both the patience of slowness and the impatience of quick processes, as well as selflessness and empathy...

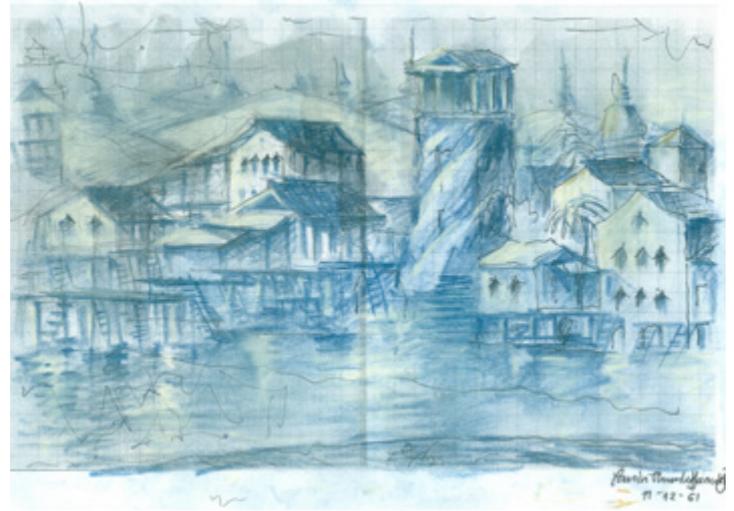
Sketching is an extraordinary discipline which involves hand, mind, and heart and requires meditative preparation and detachment as well as quick action and intense concentration. (Lucien Steil in "Zen and the Art of Sketching", lecture at the Prince's Foundation, London, 2014)



The *Capriccio* Exercise

The architectural and urban capriccio consists of a complex and artful assemblage of buildings, monuments, and places creating an intense sense of familiarity and surprise. It reveals the *chakra* of the place while unfolding a completely refreshed *genius loci* (Steil 2014).

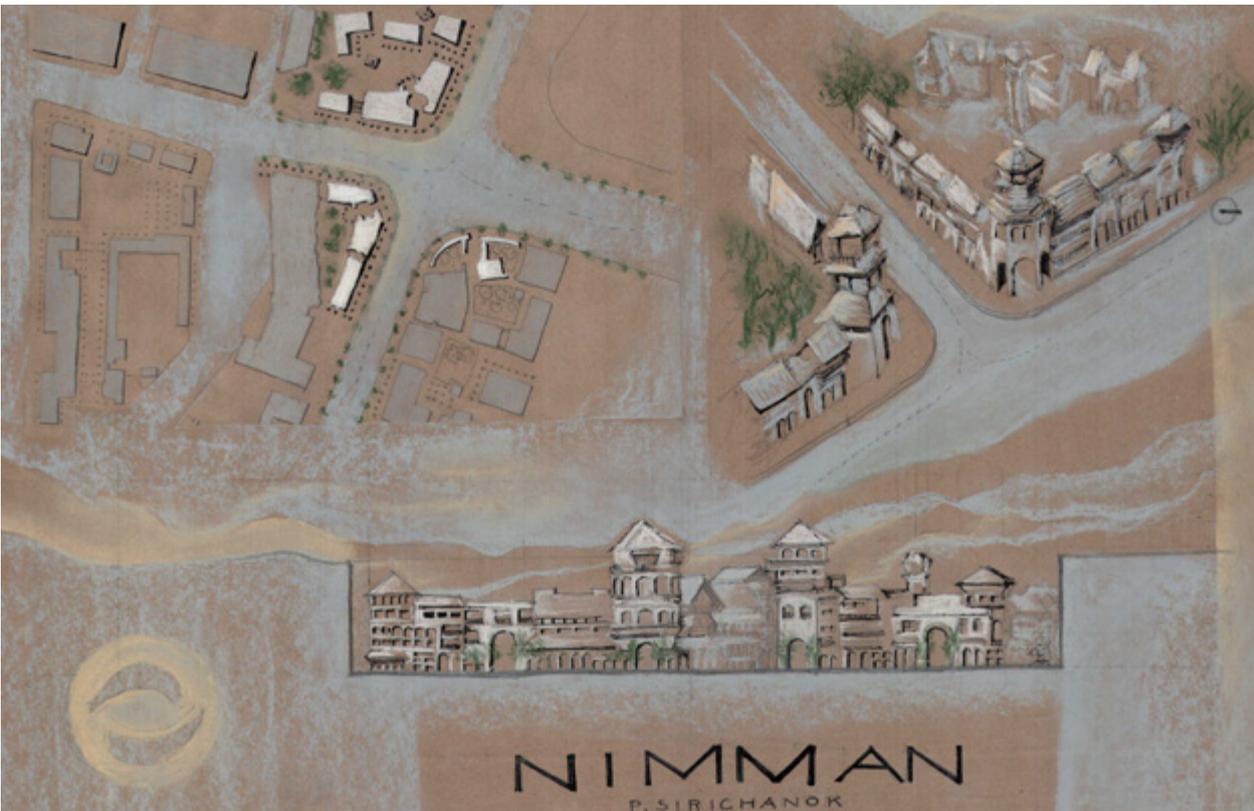
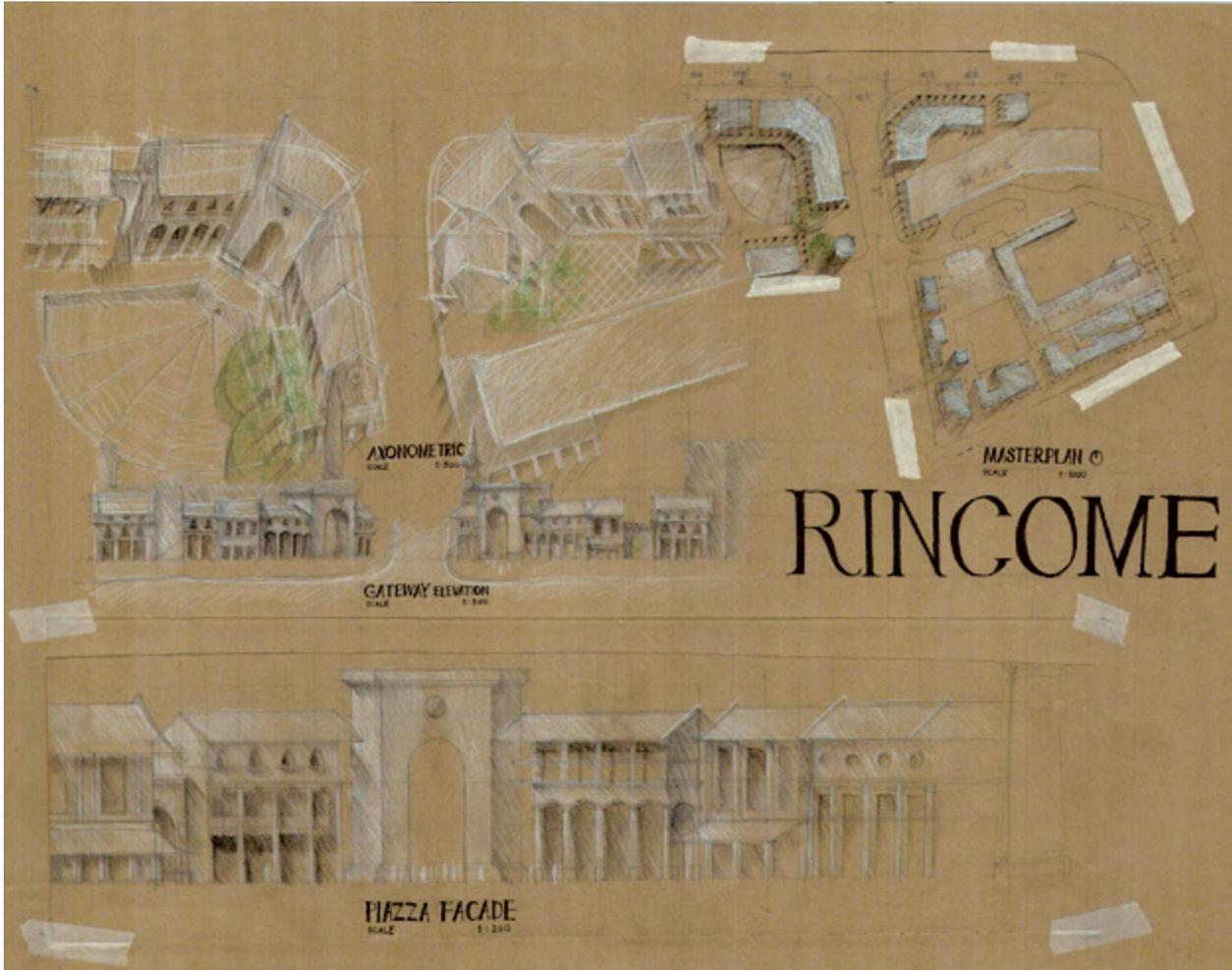
Capriccios



The Architectural *Esquisse* in the Form of an *Analytique*

The *esquisse* is a design exercise with a particular site and program which must be completed and submitted within a limited time. It is a sort of short design charrette, testing students' abilities to handle impromptu and complex design challenges, a method famously practiced at the Parisian *École des Beaux-Arts*. The students were asked to present their designs – all individual work – in the form of an *analytique*, i.e. they were to illustrate the masterplan, with an aerial view and typical elevations, while also highlighting architectural character and possibly showing details and ornamental features.

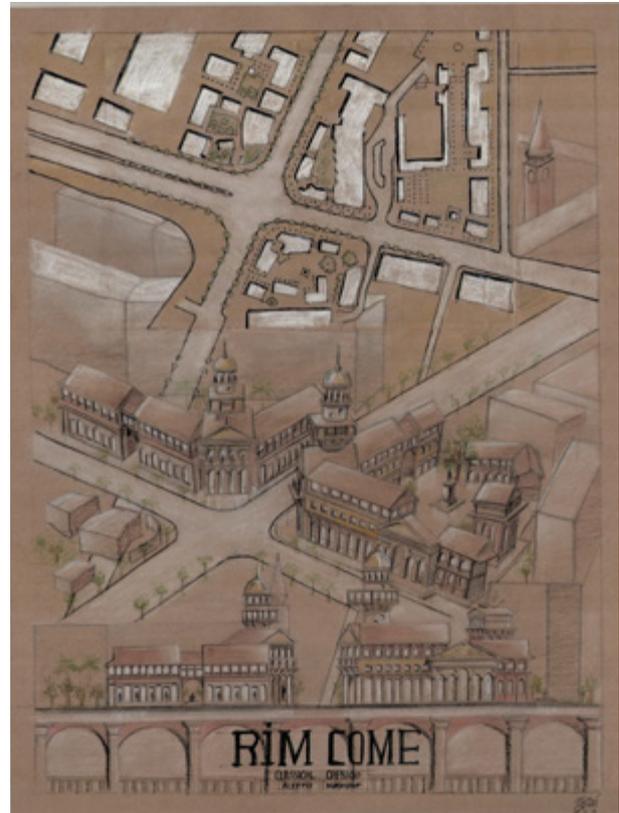
After a short master-planning seminar, a couple of designs were chosen, one derived from *Il Campo* in Siena and the other inspired by Léon Krier's repertoire of organic and irregular public spaces. The students had to choose either one and quickly work out a final proposal. The drawings were executed and rendered on brown tone paper with pencil, ink, and pastel.

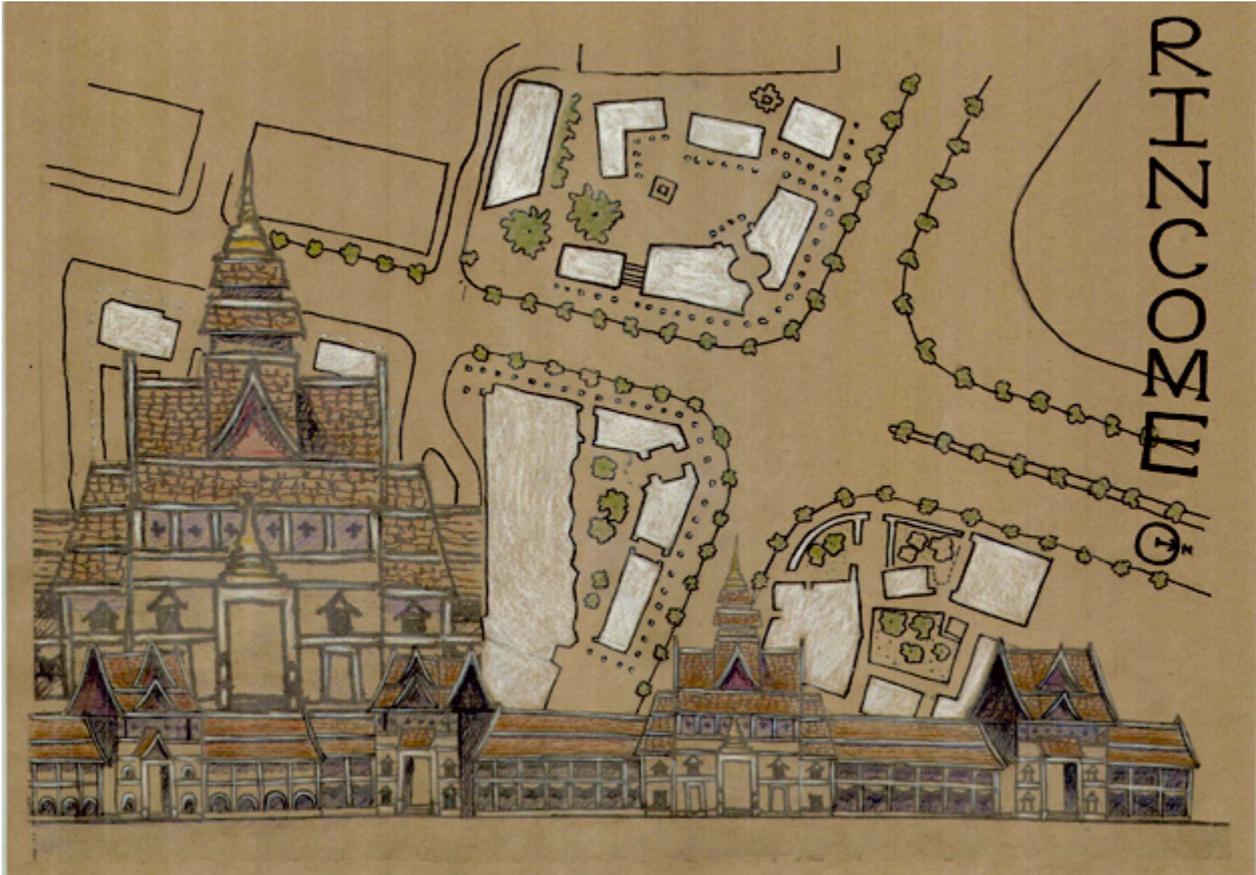


Final *esquisse-analytique* plates by students from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok

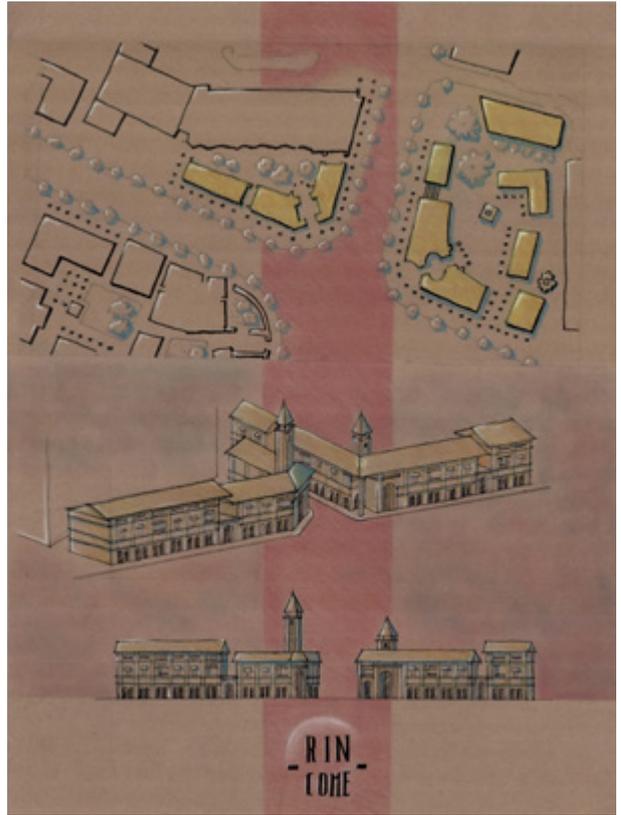
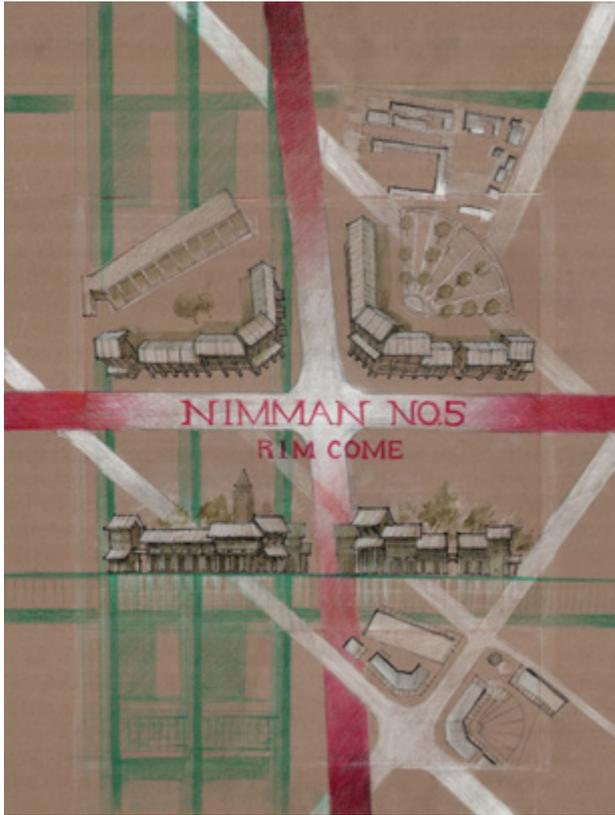
The whole design exercise, including research and briefing on precedents, the *esquisse* and *analytique*, the master-planning seminar, and the final presentation panels was completed in a day. The students spent the previous day visiting One Nimman and walking the nearby project site for a multi-sensorial experience in preparation for their task.

Final *esquisse-analytique* plates by students from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok





Final *esquisse-analytique* plates by students from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok



Final *esquisse-analytique* plates by students from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok

Chulalongkorn University Students
with their final *esquisse-analytique* plates





Ong-ard Satrabhandu (standing)
with Lucien Steil and students during
the Chiang Mai workshop
(Pirast Pacharaswate)

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Biography | Biografía | Biografia

Lucien Steil

Lucien studied architecture in Paris, graduating in 1980. He is the principal of Katarxis Urban Workshops asbl, in Luxembourg and a partner at Heure Bleue Architects, London. He is currently Associate Teaching Professor at the University of Notre Dame. He has practiced in Luxembourg, producing a wide range of traditional designs in collaboration with Colum Mulhern. He has taught and lectured in Europe, the Americas, and Asia, and collaborated with the Prince of Wales's Urban Design Task Force in Potsdam and Berlin, the University of Miami, the Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico, the University of Bologna, and the Portuguese Catholic University in Viseu, and the University of Notre Dame (Rome Studies Program and US Campus, South Bend, Indiana, University of Buckingham, and University of Luxembourg). He is the author, editor, or co-editor of many publications, including *New Palladians*, *Traditional Architecture: Timeless Building for the Twenty-First Century*, *The Architectural Capriccio*, *In the Mood for Architecture* and *Travel Sketches from Elsewhere & Nowhere*.