

Designing with Children

Fai Fah

Spark (formerly Sparch, founded in 2009) is an international architecture and design consultancy, with offices in London, Beijing, Singapore and Shanghai. An unusual opportunity presented itself in April 2010 for the practice to respond to an invitation from Thailand's TMB Bank. The Bank asked Spark to offer fee-free design expertise for a CSR (corporate social responsibility) programme. Spark would become *pro bono publico* architects for the Fai Fah project – resulting in the refurbishment of two community buildings, the first in the Pradipat district of Bangkok in 2010 and the second in the Prachautis residential district in 2012.

Motivation

The project arose through TMB Bank's motivation for a CSR programme targeted at children and young people in poor and disadvantaged residential neighbourhoods in Bangkok. The project name Fai Fah translates from Thai, to 'light energy' or 'electric spark'. Through arts-centred and life-skills activities, opportunities for development and empowerment through creativity were intended to help divert the young people of the local area from potential involvement in drugs, gambling and alcohol. The development of children's creative capabilities were also, according to the bank-client, designed to counter the more formal education offered in Thai schools: *'Most public schools emphasize memorization for individuals rather than brainstorming, group activities and strategic planning like in private or international schools... Children of lower-income families are not being put in a position to succeed.'* (Paradei Theerathada, executive vice-president for corporate communications at TMB). At Spark architects, the incentive arose from a connection between Theerathada and Stephen Pimbley, who drew on his background in community consultation at Alsop Architects. Pimbley says of this project: *'I spend my time travelling around popping in and out of places and staying perhaps a few nights but I rarely get to know the places or the people. Spending some time stepping outside this routine and doing something that is not selfishly motivated is like getting your batteries recharged by some sort of energy fairy godmother. I kid you not, the spirit and goodwill of the staff and kids at FAI-FAH is so infectious it can carry you*

What

Youth Community Centres

Where

Bangkok, Thailand

Age

12-19

Group Size

30

Project Stage

Brief

Children's Roles

Creative Inspirers, Expert Consultants

Timescale

2010-2012

Partners

Stephen Pimbley (Design director, Spark Architects)

Spark Architects (Architects)

Local architects, 365COOP Company Limited (Architect)

TMB Bank Public Company Limited (Client)

TMB Volunteers (Facilitation)

Local Children (Participants)

through many a dull day with a permanent smile on your face.'

Children's involvement

For the Pradipat centre, about 30 children, mostly local teenagers, were involved in the design process. Over two full day workshops, held over 2 weekends, the children were engaged in tasks which focussed on their likes and dislikes for the buildings they already used. Children were shown slides of precedent buildings and they drew their own pictures to represent the Fai Fah building that they would like, later presenting their ideas to their peers. Pimbley states that the work with the children *'wasn't about architecture with a big 'A' because I wasn't sure whether they understood what architecture was, or what an architect does. I tried to find a different way into the problem.'* During the second workshop, children produced artwork contributing to the interior design of the new FaiFah. To showcase their pictures, the children produced a rotating display. The young people drew their friends and these drawings were then 'dismembered' so that the heads, torsos and limbs could be interchanged with others. The culmination of this was placed in the building entrance. Children's drawings of ladders and one child's depiction of the yellow brick road from The Wizard of Oz, were hugely influential upon the façade in Prachautis as well as the yellow 'colourway' within and without. Children chose the entire palette of colours and that meant a digression from TMB's usual brand colours.

Outputs and outcomes

The conversion and refurbishment of the Prachautis centre used two typically Southeast Asian long, narrow shop houses. The spaces created across 5 floors include: a multi-use 'living room' or event space, art studio, library, gallery, dance studio and rooftop gardens. The utilities are housed in a newly built L-shape added on to the rear which, dubbed the 'Utility Stick', resembles yellow 'Swiss cheese'. At the front of the Prachautis Fai Fah centre is a conspicuous ladder-like lattice façade, requested by the children who had played with ideas and drawings around the notion of ladders as a means to progress and move up, learning new skills. This also works to make the building look quite different from neighbouring buildings, which is what the children wanted. The activities that now take place in the Fai Fah buildings do so after school for the most part. They are led mostly by carefully selected committed TMB Bank volunteers and are principally arts-based (drawing, painting, dance, cooking, graphic design, and gardening) though also include martial arts and computer work. A chief effect of this project was to create hugely (over) popular spaces and facilities loved by the local communities: *'Children are turning up and taking part in its facilities. They can't take all the children that go there'*, says Pimbley. Spark's workshops with the Fai-Fah children were 'inspiring', according to TMB Bank's Paradai Theerathada: *'They gave the children a great sense of accomplishment from being involved in the design process for such a large-scale, tangible project'*.

Resources

Dezeen Magazine 'Fai Fah by Spark' <http://www.dezeen.com/2012/09/20/fai-fah-by-spark/> (accessed 6 June 2013).

Open Buildings. 'Fai Fah Prachautis Learning Centre' <http://openbuildings.com/buildings/fai-fah-prachautis-learning-centre-profile-41982> (accessed 6 June 2013).

Spark 'Fai Fah Completed' <http://www.sparkarchitects.com/work/fai-fah#1> (accessed 6 June

2013).

Yabuka, N. (2012) Bright Spark in Bangkok. *Architects Journal*. Online. Available: <http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/aj-building-studies/bright-spark-in-bangkok/8635297.article> (accessed 6 June 2013).



The Utility Stick. Courtesy: Lin Ho/Spark Architects/TMB Bank



Children's artwork during design workshop. Courtesy: Spark Architects



The library. Courtesy: jadefoto/Spark Architects