

Text

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# Starting Somewhere

Bookended by Bangkok's Chatuchak Weekend Market and the alleyways of hipster honeypot Ari, the Pradiphat district delivers a typically Thai jumble of fruit vendors, noodle joints and a handful of high-rises. Quiet and primarily residential, this northern suburb is only a small blip on the city's radar.

But change is afoot. Cafes and galleries have started popping up along its side streets, infusing the district with a jolt of creative energy. 'Pradiphat is growing up, in a very good way,' says Nantapon Junngurn, design director at Bangkok-based architecture studio JUNNARCHITECT. 'It's one of the first streets in the city to have had its electrical wires moved below ground, and following the city's masterplan, it will become one of the main gateways to the upcoming Bang Sue central train station.'

Junngurn opened his office here in 2008, after an apprenticeship with Toyo Ito & Associates in Japan and an internship at Zaha Hadid Architects in London. As his team grew, the architect had to look for a bigger office space, which eventually — and serendipitously — led him to the site of a demolished nightclub for lease down the street. A feasibility study followed, and after making the winning bid in 2019, plans were hatched to turn the plot into a multi-storey compound with parking space and offices.

But during his monkhood — a rite of passage for many Thais — Junngurn changed his mind. 'I asked myself what I really wanted,' he says. 'And I realised I just wanted something small. A space for my staff to create good architecture.' And so, the blueprint shrank to a quartet of

irregularly sized cubes, sequenced to create a courtyard-like space between them. Dubbing it Somewhere, Junngurn took over the two semi-connected buildings in the back as his office and a gallery-slash-meeting space. The smallest building turned into a *karaage* counter, while the largest building at the front became a cafe.

The angular white cubes stand in stark contrast with their surroundings: a block of weathered shophouses on one side, a tin-roofed wooden bungalow on the other. But instead of concealing what many Bangkokians would consider eyesores, Junngurn incorporated them into the design. 'I wanted to accentuate the context,' he explains. 'This isn't Tokyo or Seoul, this is Bangkok — and these shophouses are an integral part of the city.' He left the surrounding walls untreated to showcase the patterns of red bricks and cinder blocks, and meticulously positioned the windows in the main building to frame segments of the shophouses and trees like pictures. 'I wanted to capture the coexistence between nature, the neighbourhood and ourselves,' he says.

Communal steel tables hang suspended between trees in the courtyard. Not only are they a visual connection between the buildings, they're a way to foster conversations between guests. 'Somewhere is intended as a social space for the neighbourhood,' Junngurn says, adding that it's one of the first steps of a plan to turn Pradiphat into Bangkok's next design district. 'It might be small, but if more commercial investors are willing to follow this approach, Bangkok will have more public space, and the city will be better off because of it.'



Architect Nantapon Junngurn's new mixed-use space Somewhere takes over four cubic buildings in Bangkok's Pradiphat. Two at the rear are semi-connected, and function as Junngurn's studio and gallery, with the largest and smallest becoming coffee and *karaage* spots





The stark white cubes contrast but integrate with the neighbourhood's shophouses and rough brick and cinder-block walls. The complex is based on Junngurn's vision of connection between neighbourhood, nature and people, an ethos made visible in details like the rammed-earth coffee counter made from white clay from Prachin Buri province, the abundance of timber touches, and the visual connection between Somewhere and its own built neighbours



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