

GEOMETRIC CAVITIES  
FILL ELEPHANT WORLD'S  
OBSERVATION TOWER

# ON FAMILIAR GROUND

Award-winning architect Boonserm Premthada is a proud product of his humble circumstances and local environment, writes MAX CROSBIE-JONES



BOONSERM PREMTHADA



THE STADIUM AT SURIN'S  
ELEPHANT WORLD

**W**hen Surin province's Elephant World is soon completed, one structure will loom larger than all the rest. Somewhere in this government project aimed at revitalising the fortunes of the Kuy – a Mon-Khmer community that has a family-like bond with its elephants – an observation tower made of raw red-brick and steel beams will offer a birds-eye view of the giant beasts milling around below. But the journey from the bottom up to the top will not only be a tiring means to a photogenic end, as each level in this huge yet humble structure will serve a poetic, not merely practical, function.

"The atmosphere is different on each floor," explains Boonserm Premthada at Bangkok Project Studio, his architecture firm in Bangkok's Sam Yan district. Speaking beneath a wide-brimmed hat that covers his long hair, he adds: "I want people to enjoy every moment."

It has long been the case that most architects from this part of the world are held to — and strive to meet — standards that hail from the historically more dominant West. Those that make it tend to have mixed native and western backgrounds or

educations, not to mention an interest in fusing foreign ideas with local contexts.

By most accounts, however, Boonserm is different; part of an emancipated new breed hailing from the Global South — a term used by the World Bank to refer to countries located in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean — who are defying categorisation and gaining recognition on their own terms. He is, to paraphrase a recent speech by the French academic Marie-Hélène Contal, a pioneer in a "new, multipolar world of architecture" that no longer finds answers to specific circumstances "purely in a corpus created solely by and for the West."

These are effusive words; ones bordering on hyperbole, you could cynically argue. However, in recent months it has become clear that many of architecture's top power brokers agree, and after years of quiet acclaim, Boonserm won the prestigious Dorfman Award back in May. This is no small feat. Launched by the UK's Royal Academy of Arts in 2018, this coveted accolade champions an emerging architect, practice or collective "re-imagining the future of architecture."

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What did the jury see in him? Boonserm's works were singled out for their "extraordinary empathy, originality and poetic qualities." But this praise only hints at the full picture: behind his work lies a humanist outlook grounded in his working-class roots and some career-defining setbacks. This background and these setbacks — not to mention the sense that he is a proud product of his humble circumstances — becomes clear as he talks openly and passionately at the meeting desk in his office, next to shelves lined with awards and scale models of his projects.

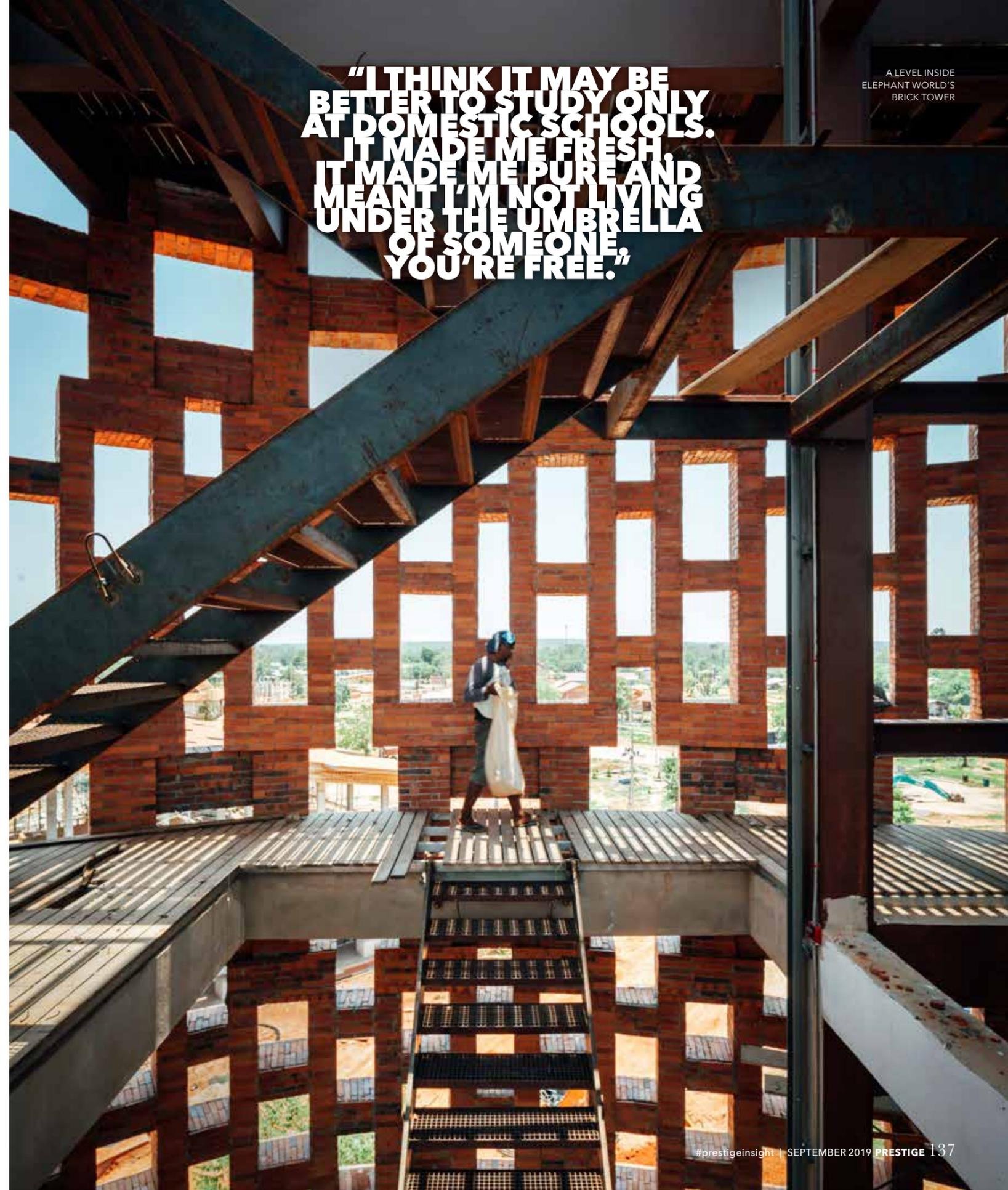
"I grew up in nothing," he says of his childhood in Bangkok's Bon Kai area during the late sixties and seventies. "My family rented a small room in a wooden house. There were five families in total, one per room." In those hardscrabble years, there were few toys for him to play with in the traditional sense. "If I wanted a superhero, I drew it. If I wanted a car, I drew it. Using only a pencil and used newspapers I learnt to express my imagination." He also recounts his late father, a carpenter by trade, teaching him to carefully cut wood. "I learnt to measure two or three times before you cut, because if you make a mistake you've lost it."

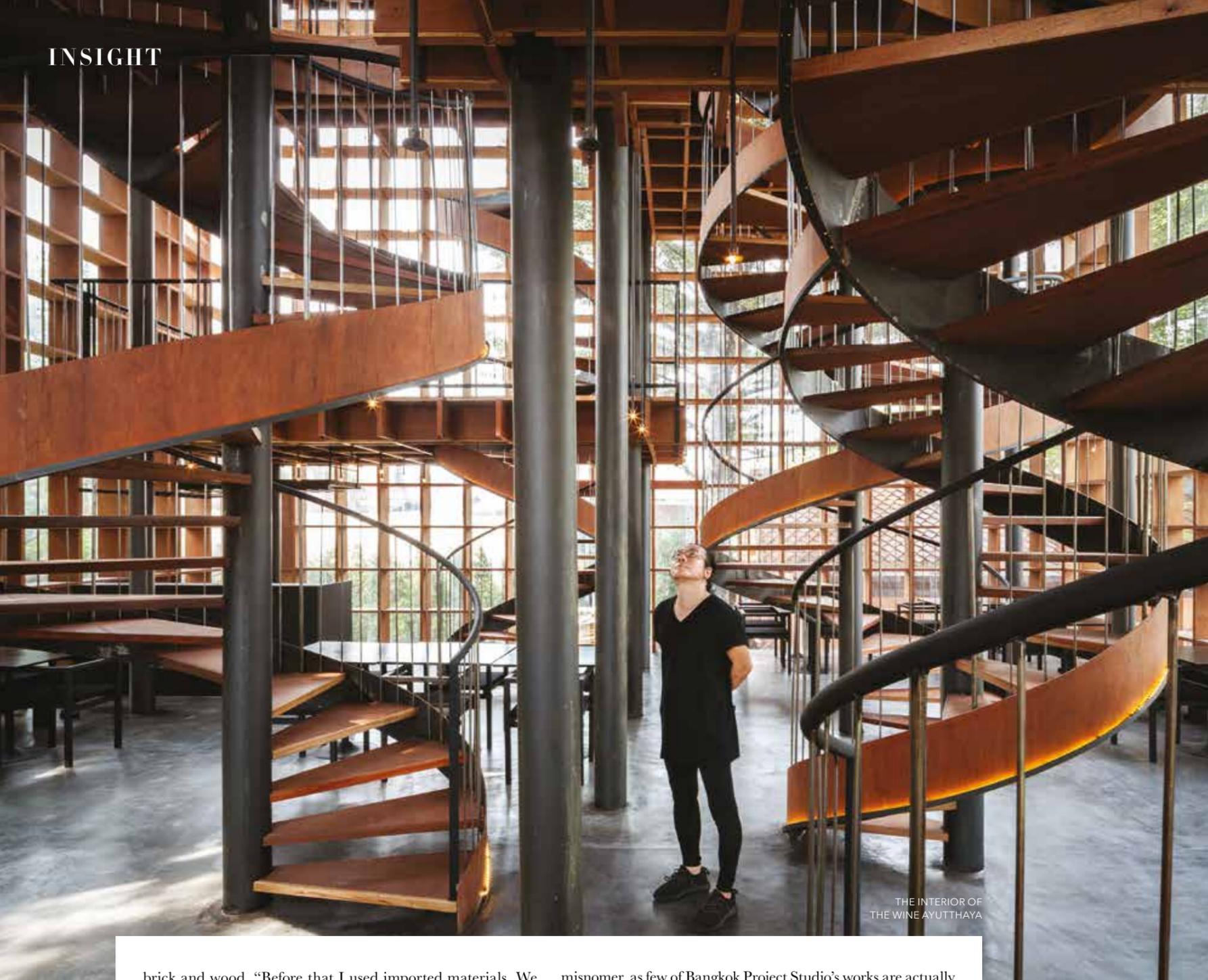
Even more formative were his years of study. At Silpakorn University, for example, he studied interior design and discovered the importance of aesthetics (the busts of its founder, Tuscan-born sculptor Silpa Bhirasri, on display in his office are a testament to its impact). Later, Chulalongkorn University, where he did a master's degree in architecture and now lectures, taught him that deep research is vital to any successful masterplan or building — a lesson he has never forgotten.

Unlike many of his Thai peers, studying abroad was not an option; his modest means and the 1997 financial crash conspired against it. At the time he was upset that sponsorship and grants had dried up, but looking back he is grateful. "Studying in a foreign country is the dream of Thais, especially a boy like me from the working class. But now I think it may be better to study only at domestic schools. It made me fresh. It made me pure and meant I'm not living under the umbrella of someone. You're free."

The Tom Yum Goong crisis was also the catalyst that triggered his interest in "non-architecture" (creative work that cannot be classified as architecture, be it artisanal or improvised), and using locally sourced eco-materials, such as

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A LEVEL INSIDE  
ELEPHANT WORLD'S  
BRICK TOWER

THE INTERIOR OF  
THE WINE AYUTTHAYA

brick and wood. “Before that I used imported materials. We didn’t care how expensive they were or environmental aspects. That made me rethink things and realise that I am one of the problems in architecture.”

In 2003, he set up Bangkok Project Studio in the resolute hope of finding solutions. “My question back then was: is the only way to design architecture to follow Western theories?” he recalls. “I said no. I respect the masters, I respect theory, but I think it’s impossible to use only one theory from one place and apply it everywhere. I came to the decision that it cannot be done.”

Today, the name of Boonserm’s firm seems a bit of a

misnomer, as few of Bangkok Project Studio’s works are actually in Bangkok. In 2011, he created the Kantana Film and Animation Institute, a 2,000 square metre undergraduate college for a Thai film studio out in Nakhon Pathom province. In addition to Surin’s Elephant World, which he began work on in 2015, he has also created the plan for Baan Chang Town Hall, a multi-purpose concrete edifice proposed for a slice of land near Rayong’s Map Ta Phut industrial estate (pending approval). Other projects include a mangrove conservation learning center for the Thai Red Cross in Samut Prakan (under construction), and a PVC-sheet clad wine bar in Ayutthaya filled with plywood and snaking staircases (now open).

KANTANA INSTITUTE IN  
NAKHON PATHOM

“Bangkok is for me finished. It’s money country,” he says when asked about the conspicuous lack of Boonserm projects in his home city. There is a hint of mischief to this answer, but also a pragmatism — projects in Thailand’s rural and peri-urban hinterlands, on what he calls “unfinished country”, suit him and his goals down to the ground. “Unfinished places or provinces need me, my architecture, to improve life for people. Plus no one in Bangkok will employ me,” he adds with a mirthful laugh.

Underpinning each of his projects is an ardent belief that architecture — no matter how small its footprint — can spark positive economic and social change, and should be for everybody, not the few. “My architecture is for the public,” he says. “Everyone can use it; everyone can benefit from it.” Another common thread is an idiosyncratic imperfectness. He even has a phrase for it: ‘Boonserm’s Spirituality’. “My spirit is rawness,” he explains. “My work is not neat and has mistakes. Outside it’s very solid, looks very simple, but inside it’s very surprising. You’ll be surprised at everything.”

One surprising aspect, for his peers at least, is sound. A few years back, an architect visiting Kantana Institute was struck by how the undulating patterns and fluctuating heights and widths of the red brick, temple-like walls there create unusual echoes and aural textures. In response, Boonserm —

who is deaf in one ear and has only 30 percent hearing in the other — began re-contemplating old works and thinking about whether sound had been subconsciously influencing his designs all along. Today, it factors into all his research and projects, including Elephant World. “We studied how elephants use their feet rather than their ears to perceive sound,” he says.

None of all this — Boonserm’s background or the singular methodology resulting from it — will be foremost in visitors’ minds when they soon begin navigating this sprawling site’s museum and stadium, and then gingerly make their way up the observation tower’s staircases, past geometric cavities of varying sizes and floors that feel like dim, meditative enclosures. And that’s exactly the way he wants it. The multi-sensory experience is what’s important, not the building or the name behind it. “I want people to see the ground, to look at the elephants walking and to understand about where they come from. It’s not about me — it’s about creating empathy.” ■



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