

Bank of Asia, Bangkok



Project Data

Owners: Asia Properties Co., Ltd. (Design commissioned by the Bank of Asia)
Architects: Sumet Jumsai Associates Co., Ltd. Sumet Jumsai, Kwanchai Laksanakorn, Vichai Chitseri, Viraphan Chynwat
Engineers: Structural: Tawatchai Nakata
 Electrical: Chirasak Poonpol, Rak Suwanmongkol
Airconditioning: Wichai Laksanakorn
Sanitary: Surin Setmanit
General Contractor: Kasemkij Construction Co., Ltd.
Design began in September 1983
Total floor area: Office building: 23,506 square metres
Multi-storey carpark: 10,671 square metres (for 342 cars)
Construction: September 1984 — September 1986
Construction costs: Approximately US\$10 million inclusive of interiors and landscape.

In the competitive atmosphere of Bangkok, every bank and big firm aspires to have its own distinctive head office. But when the directors of the Bank of Asia commissioned Sumet Jumsai and his team to design its new headquarters they did not quite know what they were in for.

The directors belong to the new bankers' generation and they are possibly the youngest amongst the Thai bank executives. What they wanted was a design which would reflect the new generation, their own, and usher in a new era involving their new computerised banking service. What they have got was in accordance with their wish. But also more; they have unwittingly become part of a new turning point in architecture. What emerged is a building in the shape of a robot which is now given a host of attributes: user-friendly, 21st century, Post High-Tech, etc.

Although the design contains within it an element of humour, it is also a serious theoretical statement as well as being practical in its compliance to stringent municipal codes and structural and spatial

requirements. In effect the staggered robot shape represents an optimum solution to the set-back regulations which entail an 18 degree incline from all sides.

The bank building stands on a 1.6 acre site in Bangkok's newest business strip scheduled to be served by a metro network. The structure rises to a height of 20 floors, and has a total floor area of 23,506 square metres. Following the shape of the robot, the floor areas decrease in stages on the 4th, 8th, 12th, 16th, and 18th levels. Behind the main building an eight-storey carpark of 10,671 square metres accommodates 342 cars.

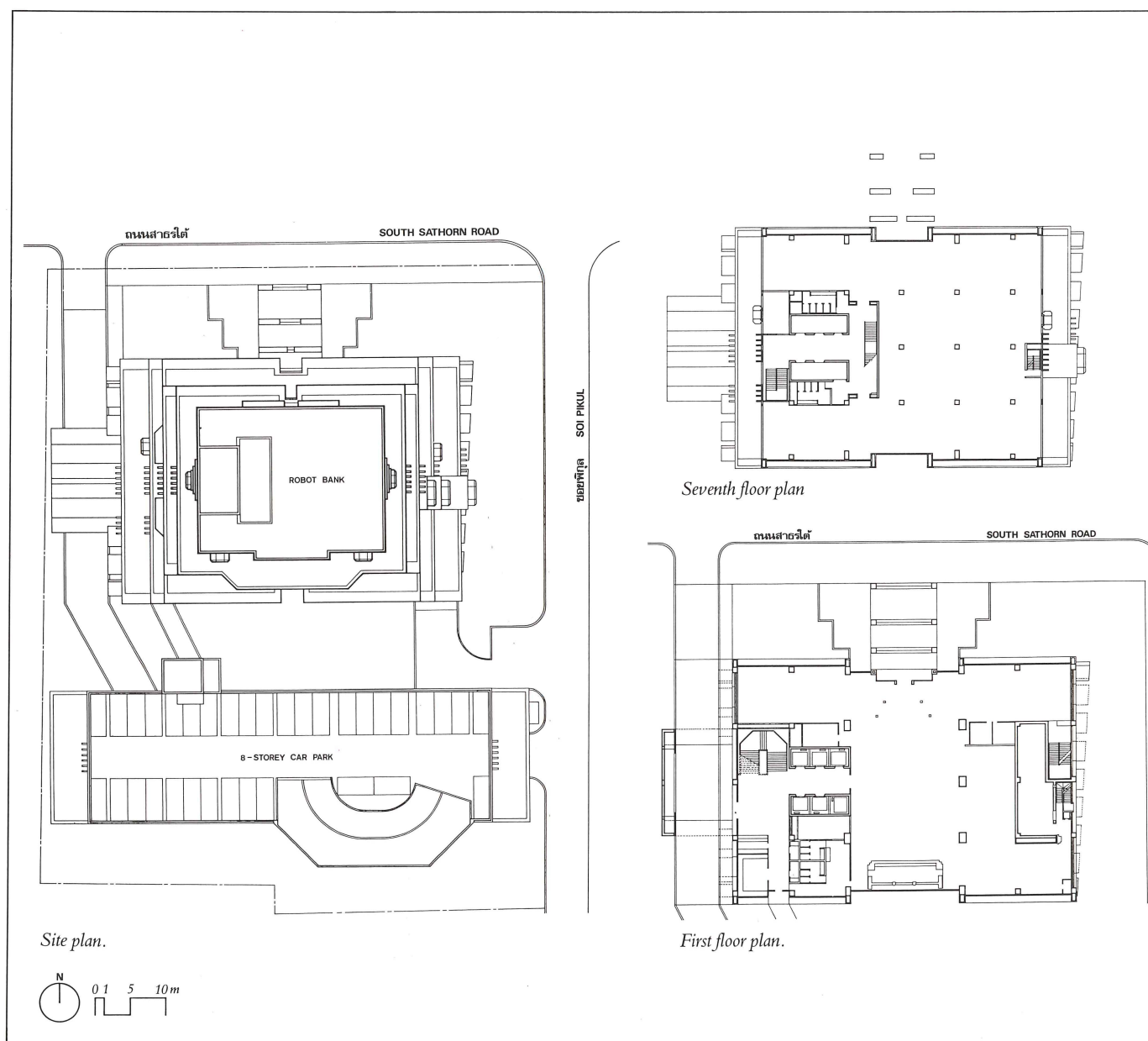
The east and west sides of the building are constructed of masonry with a minimum of apertures, so as to shield the interior of the building from solar radiation and make it more energy efficient. The north and south walls of the building are tinted curtain walls with "overhang" balconies to facilitate window cleaning and maintenance. They not only serve a practical purpose, but their brilliant blue colour forms the symbol of the bank.

*Below: View from Sathorn Road in the evening.
 Right: View of the north elevation.*



Text, photographs and plans courtesy of the architect.





The exterior decorative devices of the building serve not only as components of the robot design, such as “nuts”, “bolts” and “caterpillar wheels”, but also have practical functions as window casings, sunshades, and an entrance canopy. The two antennae protruding from the roof serve as communications and lightning protection. Floor by floor functions can be summarised as follows.

The basement has a car ramp leading down to the security room where money is crated. Adjacent to it are personal safe deposit rooms. The rest of the floor is taken up by machine rooms for airconditioning, electrical, water supply and water treatment system.

The ground (1st) floor faces the street with a portico of glass reinforced cement

free-standing pillars with lintels of receding lengths to lead the eyes into the double height banking hall. On the east side are located the principal strong room, offices, and a staircase leading down to safe deposit rooms in the basement. On the west side there are working spaces, a common room for staff, toilets and a hall-way connecting the banking hall to the main lift lobby and side entrance. The latter is linked at the rear with a covered walkway to the carpark building behind.

From the street it is possible to see into the banking hall through to the garden at the back of the building.

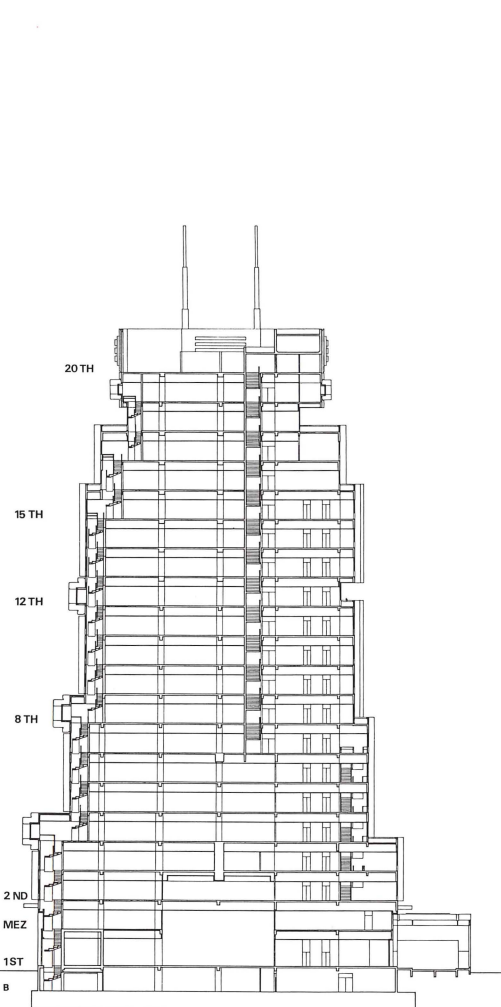
The mezzanine floors are located on either side of the banking hall and contain individual offices and meeting rooms.

The second floor is occupied by a

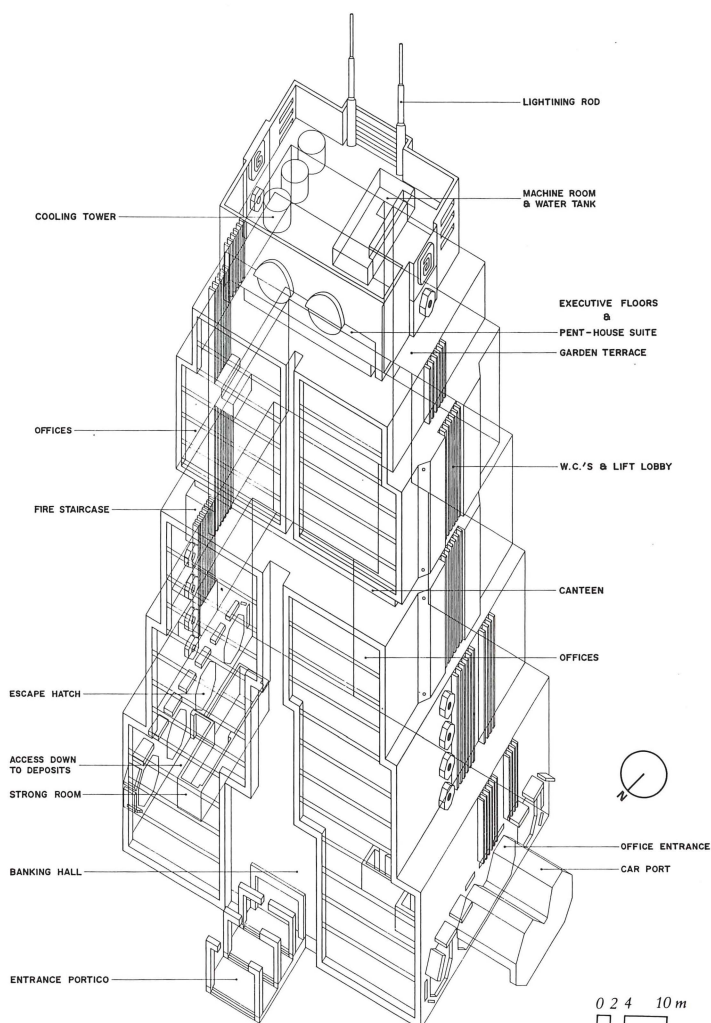
large conference and multi-purpose hall with a capacity of 430 persons, as well as offices and staff training rooms.

Transfer girders with depths of the whole storey are located on the third floor to cut off columns in the middle rows so that the banking hall and the multi-purpose hall on 2nd floor can be relatively column-free. The bank's computer section is housed in this floor in the space between the girders.

The upper floors contain general office space. They recede at the 4th, 8th, 12th, 16th and 18th levels so that the building line is kept just within the setback regulations. There is a canteen on the 12th floor while on the 18th and 19th floors, the space is design as executive suites with dining and meeting rooms.



Section.



Axonometric schematic view.

Mechanical rooms and cooling towers for the airconditioning system are located on the 20th floor, and above that a water tank, and two 16.8 metres high antennae.

Post High-Tech features

The architecture might be classified as Post High-Tech in the sense that it is the Post Modern treatment of the "machine". The "machine", as embodied by the robot, does not exhibit its mechanical parts. Instead it is a finished product wrapped in a stylized body. The eyes, arms, knuckles, chest and legs of the robot are abstract (yet not inhuman), while the nuts and bolts and caterpillars, instead of being a faithful reproduction of the "machine", are mere abstraction of the mechanical parts.

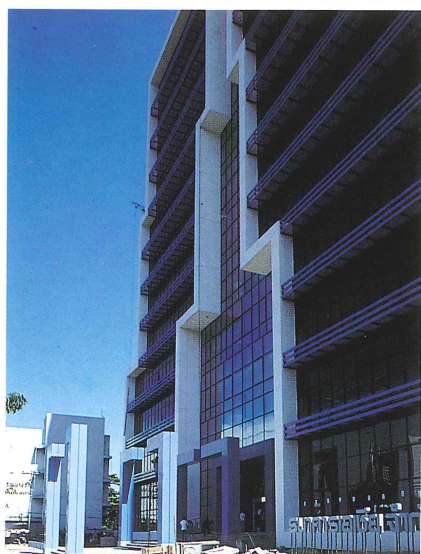
The nuts — the biggest in the world — are made of glass reinforced concrete. They are brought from the factory in different sections, assembled and joined on site. They come in two sizes, the biggest ones measuring 3.8 metres in diameter on the outside and 2 metres in the opening.

The eye balls facing the street measure 6 metres in diameter and are made of reflective glass while the eye lids consist of metallic louvres. Behind them are located the principal meeting and dining rooms of the top executive suites. From there the panorama of the city can be seen through the circular opening.

Still to be implemented is the special lighting effect for the eyes which were designed to wink at night with aircraft

landing lights operated by automatic dimmers, and high power strobe lights. The glowing and dimming, as well as the free play of the high power strobe lights, would form a repeating rhythm for use with an electronic composition called "The Robot Symphony" by Jacques Beckaert, a Bangkok composer.

The banking hall's interior architecture was designed in association with 7 Associates, a local firm who otherwise handled the actual detailed interior design. The hall's character reflects the robotic exterior and, standing guard at the main door, are four sculptures with lights by Thaveechai Nitiprabha, a Thai sculptor, to announce entry into the Post High-Tech structure.

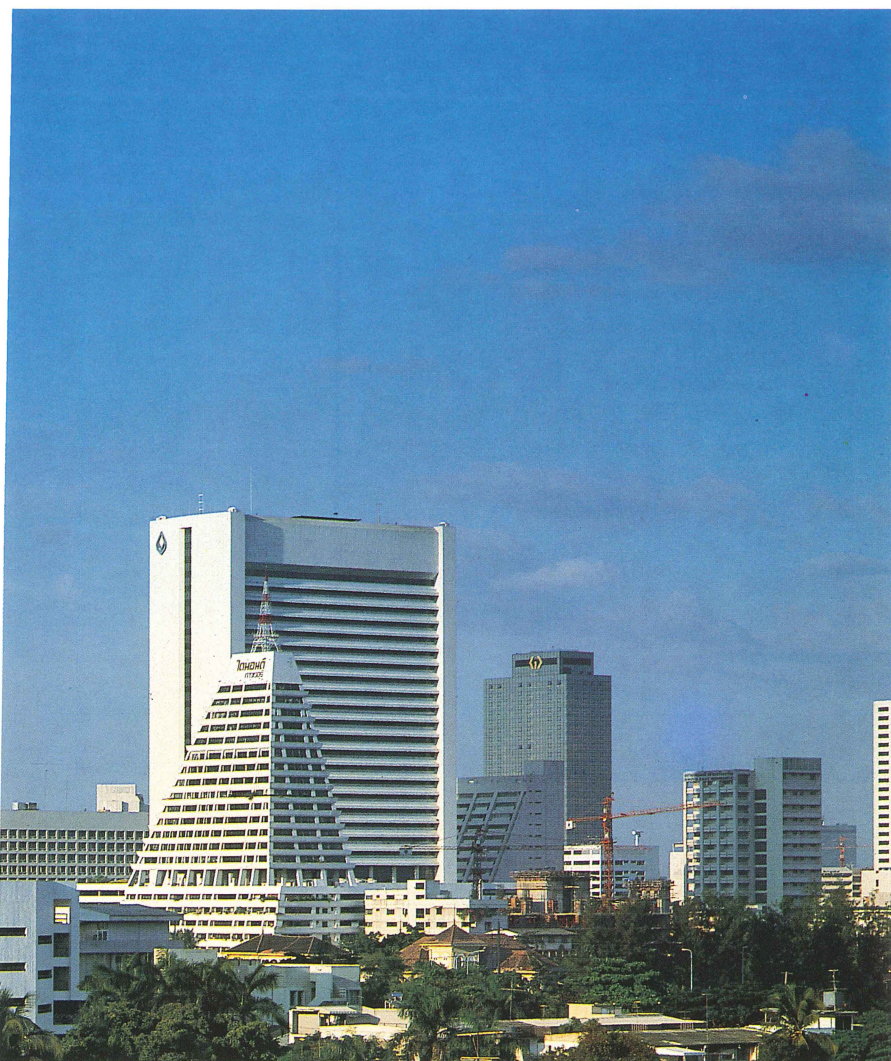


Top: View from the south with Bangkok's business district in the background.

Above: Portico of the main entrance.

Right: Caterpillar wheel on the east side of the Robot Bank.

Far right: The eyes peering down on the street.



Why the Robot?

Why the grandfather's clock for the AT&T Building in New York?

Why the Acropolis in downtown Bangkok?

Why the proliferation of Post Modern Classicism all over the world?

And why not the robot?

There is however, a great deal of difference between Post Modern classical revival and the robot. I do not mean the physical dissimilarity but rather the intellectual disparity between the two, a topic which deserves some explanation.

Present-day classical revivalism, which is the main branch of the so-called Post Modernism, represents the state of the art — an intellectual bankruptcy and a cultural cul-de-sac — in the West. It is a protest movement against the puritanical Modern Movement and the bland international style in architecture. It advocates a new freedom in design which means that henceforth “anything goes”. This in itself is refreshing, and there have been some very refreshing projects as a result. But it is a protest movement which seeks to replace without offering a replacement, and in the ensuing dilemma it enlists the support of the historical repertoire: Greek, Roman, Gothic and Romantic. With accent on classicism it has become a pastiche of classical elements, and in its new-found “freedom” it has become a movement which harbours people who cannot design. Without any qualm or understanding of the classical spirit it is at best anti-classical: it weighs down heavily (with its top-heavy entablatures and keystones) on the soul in contrast to the uplifting qualities of true classicism, and at worst it is a catalogue of meaningless architectural motifs.

The latter, for which Bangkok is outstanding, suits both the architects who dupe and the clients who are duped into the make-believe world of the nouveaux riches. It is the epitome of materialism and commercialism.

There are two things left to be said at this point.

First, why should we in this part of the world play the western historical game? Why, for that matter, play any historical game at all since it all amounts to retrogression?

Second, art and architecture, like science and technology, should represent progression. Therefore why not get ready for the 21st century?

We therefore come to the question of why the robot? The answer, of course, is that it need not be the robot. It could be a host of other metamorphoses as long as they act as agents to free the spirit from the present intellectual impasse and propel it forward into the next century.



However, the robot does proclaim the following: it proclaims the demise of Post Modernism, including catalogue architecture and Punk Architecture (or Anti-Architecture) as proliferated along the West Coast, as well as High-Tech Architecture as embodied in the Centre Pompidou and the Hongkong Bank building in Hong Kong.

Here, I would like to digress a little and say something about High-Tech. It is a contradictory but interesting movement (which I myself have enjoyed in the Science Museum project of 1975) which can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution, a movement which engrosses itself in the machine while at the same time secretly courting the anti-industrial sentiment of William Morris with the love for hand-made artifacts and honest manual labour. Like the Pompidou, the Hongkong Bank shows both these aspects: it turns itself inside out to exhibit and celebrate its mechanical and structural constitutions while at the same time several of its structural components, trusses, wind bracings, masts, giant pin-joints, etc. are not, indeed cannot be, industrially made. If anything, they have to be hand-made or machine-tooled down to their specific designs. Implicated is that particular assembly technique which can only be accomplished by a truly competent master craftsman.

But all this is part of the British historical inevitability and the continuing playing-out of British paternalism as evidenced by the Industrial Revolution romanticism and the

praise for "the good and honest work" by healthy-looking craftsmen while the upper class look on approvingly.

The Americans, obviously must think that the above is strange. That is why High-Tech Architecture never caught on in America. But the fact that they now recycle the Graeco-Roman porticoes and keystones is in itself a contradiction to the foregoing for it shows lineage to their colonial buildings. What I want to say, I suppose, is that they are still clients of England, culturally speaking, in a roundabout way. This leaves the further frontier, the West Coast, which oddly enough opts for punk culture, a movement begun by the East End of London urchins circa 1976 and now proliferated far and wide in places like Vienna and Australia (Mad Max, etc.).

There is no future in any of the above movements. They have however, managed to demolish the modern movement and to bury the international style so that, if the fracas can now be cleared, the stage would be set for a new cultural direction.

That direction must be toward the 21st century.

At this point in time humanity has become entirely dependent on the machine. Whether one likes it or not the machine has become our environment from the wrist watch to traffic jams and computers. Man and his tooling extension have become inseparable. The 21st century will see to it that the two will become even more so, so that man and machine will be almost as one.

Let me give you a simple example. When we start to learn to drive a car, we feel that the machine is an entity apart, unpredictable and perhaps even dangerous. As we get the hang of it it becomes more of a part of ourselves. Now that we can drive we do not have to struggle with its control mechanisms: we no longer have to think about it. We merely "transmit" our thoughts or wishes to the machine and it reacts accordingly, automatically.

In the next century there will be a two-phase revolution. The first phase will be the amalgam between man and machine. The latter will no longer stand for itself or for its own aesthetics; rather it will be completely humanised by and become an automatic part of its creator. The second phase, occurring in the second half of the century, will be the true communications revolution when the present communications technology, still bound by physical properties and hence limited to the speed of light, will pierce that electromagnetic barrier and enter the metaphysical reality.

But first, the machine as we know it in this century has to be exorcised. It must no longer remain a separate entity or elevated on a pedestal for worship. This exorcism has been completed in the Sathorn robot. Now the machine, this robot, is no longer a "big deal"; it has become a part of our daily lives, a friend, ourselves. It has entered the first phase of the 21st century revolution.

Sumet Jumsai



Far left: Interior view of the banking hall looking towards the front door.

Left: Sculptures inside the main entrance of the banking hall.

