

The Nation Building, Bangkok



Project Data

Location: Bangkok, Thailand
Client: Nation Publishing Group Company
Architects: Sumet Jumsai Associates
Engineers (Structural): Suchart Piripanya (SJA)
Electrical: JRC Company, Ltd.
Airconditioning: W. and Associates Consultants Co. Ltd.
Sanitary: Environmental System Design Co. Ltd.
Total floor area: 7,430 square metres
Design: 1988

Layout Plan

The front (north) part of the site is allocated to a complex of office building, canteen and sports area. A guardhouse and front office for job applications is placed at the front gate. The main office building itself is wrapped around on three sides by a lotus pond which is connected to a canal nearby.

The printing shop and warehouse are tentatively located at the rear and are connected to the office building by a passerelle running over the parking lot.

Structure

The office building contains eleven floors which recede towards the top so that the ground floor contains 820 square metres and the 11th floor 425 square metres of space. The total floor area is 7,430 square metres. The structure is to be reinforced concrete, the whole resting on long, concrete piles. Tentatively surface finishes are to be of mosaic tile and, in part, Urethane paint. The north and south elevations are curtain walls of tinted glass. On the east and west sides there are solid walls to shield the building from the tropical sun.

Space and Function

On the ground floor, the driveway comes under a large, square porch (the "stool" on which the anthropomorphic editor or graphic artist sits). This leads to the main side entrance, information desk and circulation/service core. The space on this floor is for the editorial office. A balcony juts out over the pond to give a view of the basketball and tennis court. A covered passageway links the building from the circulation core to the canteen.

The mezzanine occupies about three-fifths of the floor plan, leaving the rest as a curvilinear double-height volume. This level, also for the editorial staff, is linked to the printing shop by a passerelle.

The floor plan of the fifth level staggers and recedes with the height. The fifth floor shows a typical plan with open terraces on the north side where the stagger occurs.

Finally, a large, reinforced concrete frame, triangular in plan, is mounted on top of the roof. Two sides of the frame, slanting out towards the highway are hollowed to contain huge electronic panels with running messages such as latest news headlines, weather situation, the name of the building, etc. The triangular frame itself encloses the lift machine room, water-tower and cooling towers for the central air-conditioning system.

Statement by the Architect:

It is rare to come across owners who tell the architect "give us the best" and then give him a complete free hand in the design interpretation. This is what happened in this project. It began when Nation Publishing Group Co. Ltd., publishers of the Nation Newspaper, wanted to build its head office building together with a printing and warehouse complex, and sought out this architect, who is also one of their regular guest columnists. Well-acquainted with the 'ins and outs' of the editorial office and the printing process, and interrupted by the owners only with occasional encouragement, the designer and his associates have formulated what they call 'Cubist Architecture'.

Located a few kilometres southeast of Bangkok on the highway to the resort town of Pattaya, the site borders a strip which is undergoing rapid transformation from a rural to an urban environment. The area has no urban texture at present, and will probably not have any later, given the 'free-for-all' phenomenon of development which is taking place there.

The land, comprised of approximately 3.6 acres, has a road frontage of 100 metres, and a canal running along one side. Until recently the entire area was a rice field.

Concept

The challenge here was to come up with a design which would sit well in the rice field for a few years, and then afterwards in a 'jungle' of non-descript buildings. Besides this there was no other discernable challenge. Even the corporate image was not a prerequisite (if that can be called a challenge!).

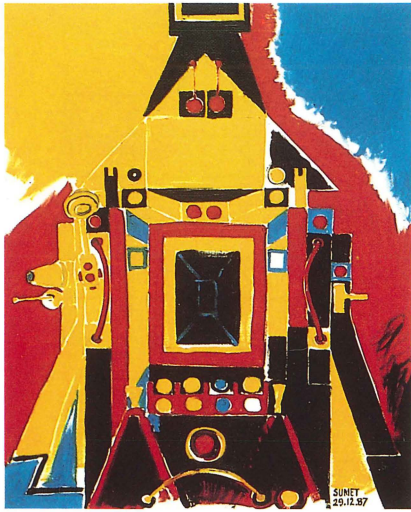
Right, top: Robot painting by Sumet Jumsai.

Right, above: Painting "Ronchamp 4" by Sumet Jumsai.

Below: Robot Building Head Office of the Bank of Asia, Bangkok.



Text, photographs and drawings courtesy of the architect.



But the first prerequisite was a tough one to crack, for to do so presupposes getting away from the idea of architecture altogether. This, at any rate, was the approach adopted at the outset.

First, how to be free from “architecture”, from the current intellectual *cul-de-sac*. Painting, especially Cubism, came to mind. Of course, both Cubism and present-day architectural *deconstructivism* share formal similarities which go back to the beginning of the century and even beyond, the one a prominent client of France, the other of Russia. But in painting, the instinct for freedom of manoeuvre and joy in compositional design go beyond intellectualisation which currently spells doom for architecture.

The project, then, began with painting. A painting can be carried about and hung in different environments without having to be in context with them.

Other fleeting thoughts came at this point: the profile of the chief editor working at a word processor, or perhaps a graphic artist doing a page layout, sitting on a stool; electronic circuitries surfacing here and there; an anthropomorphic remnant of a previous robotic scheme (See Bank of Asia, MIMAR 23, 1987); and a robotic painting.

Cubism emerged in more than one aspect here. The first, the conventional

aspect, is discernable in the three vertical planes or party walls which, going west to east, starts with a square and rectangular composition, and continues to become partly curvilinear, eventually freeing up completely into a free play of curves. Corb's late Cubist painting — a sort of simplified Braque — comes to mind here.

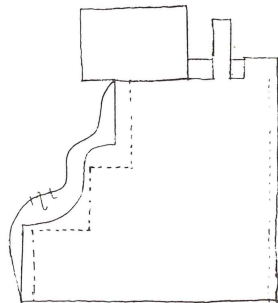
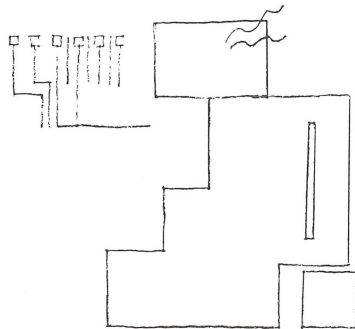
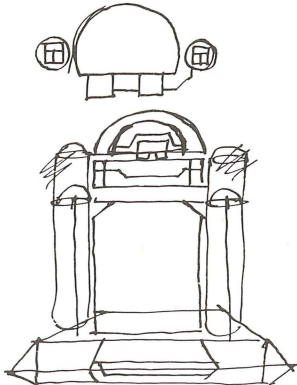
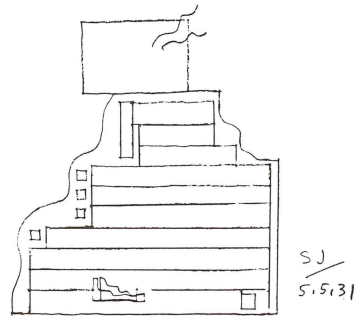
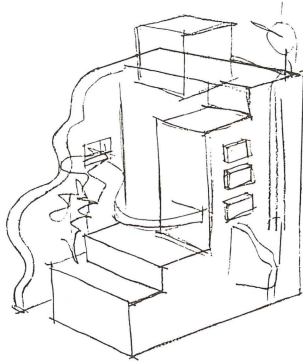
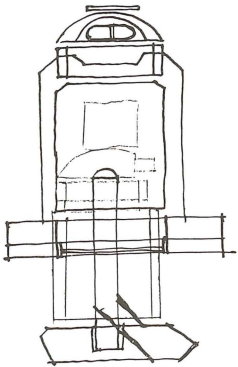
The second aspect transcends mere physical metamorphosis: Cubism in this case is seen as a collage of the different stages of thought, of the design process itself.

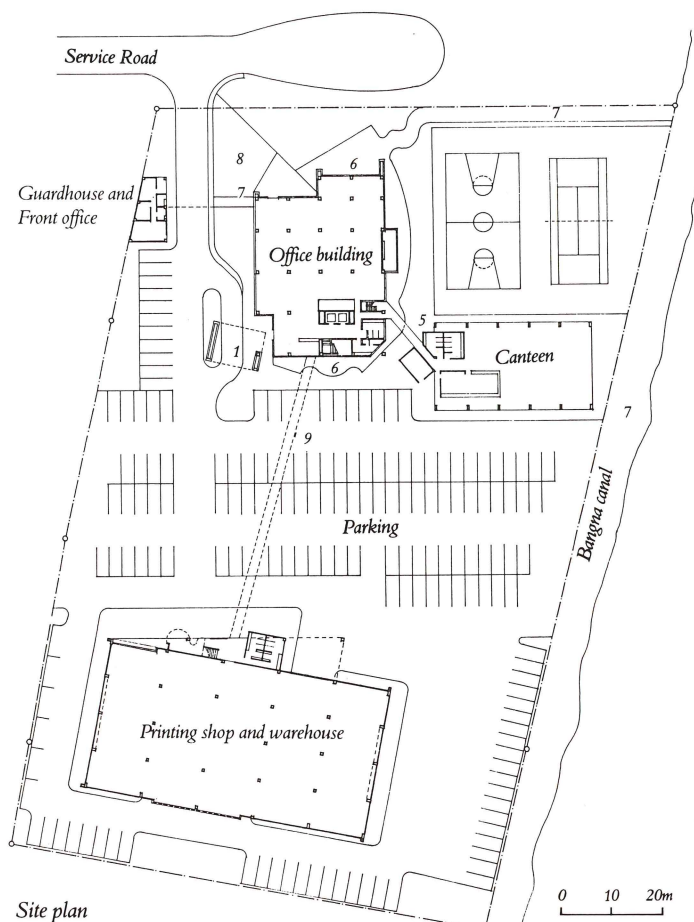
Since this is a “painting” that is going to be built, questions about the architectural premise cannot be avoided. The first question must be: can architecture be something *personal* and disconnected from the prevailing comprehension and movement in architecture, and if so, would it not lead to a kind of hermetic debate?

At this point one may be reminded of Corb's chapel at Ronchamp which contains but puts aside functional, social and even intellectual issues to become highly involuted, personal and spiritual. So much was it involuted that it radiates universality; it resonates in the hearts and minds of a great many people.

So, the present scheme has taken note of this possibility.

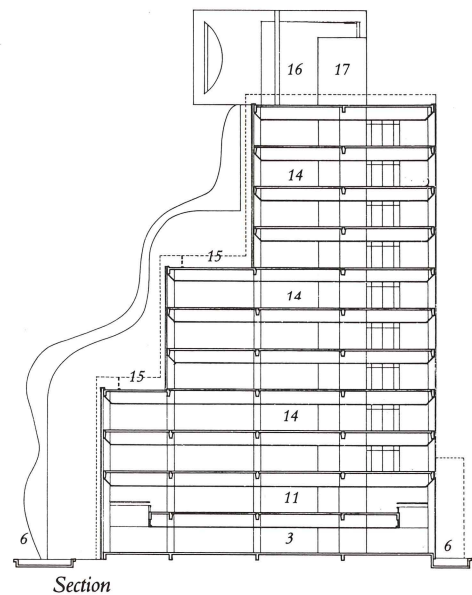
Sumet Jumsai



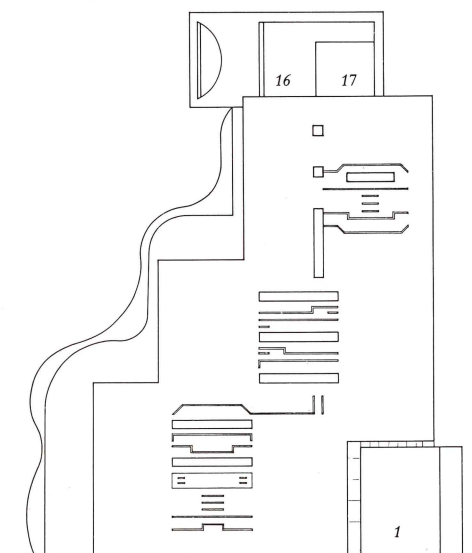


Site plan

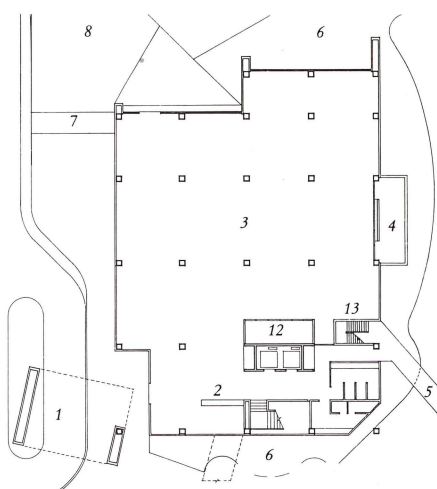
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|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Carport | 10. Double height void |
| 2. Reception desk | 11. Mezzanine editorial office |
| 3. Editorial office | 12. Airconditioning machine room |
| 4. Balcony over pond | 13. Fire staircase |
| 5. Covered walkway to canteen | 14. Office |
| 6. Lotus pond | 15. Terrace |
| 7. Canal | 16. Electronic panels |
| 8. Approach plaza | 17. Machine room and water tank |
| 9. Passerelle | 18. Cooling tower |



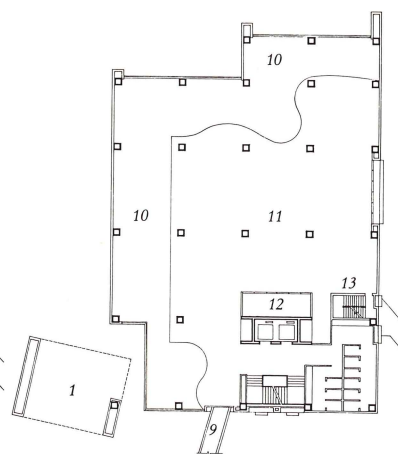
Section



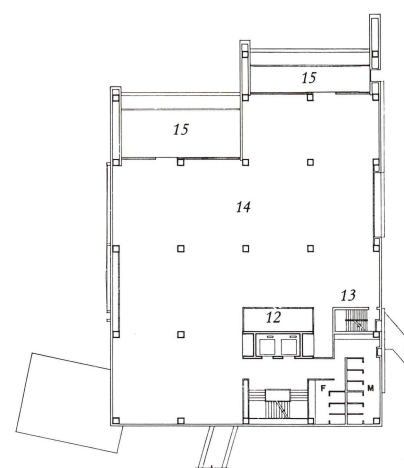
West elevation



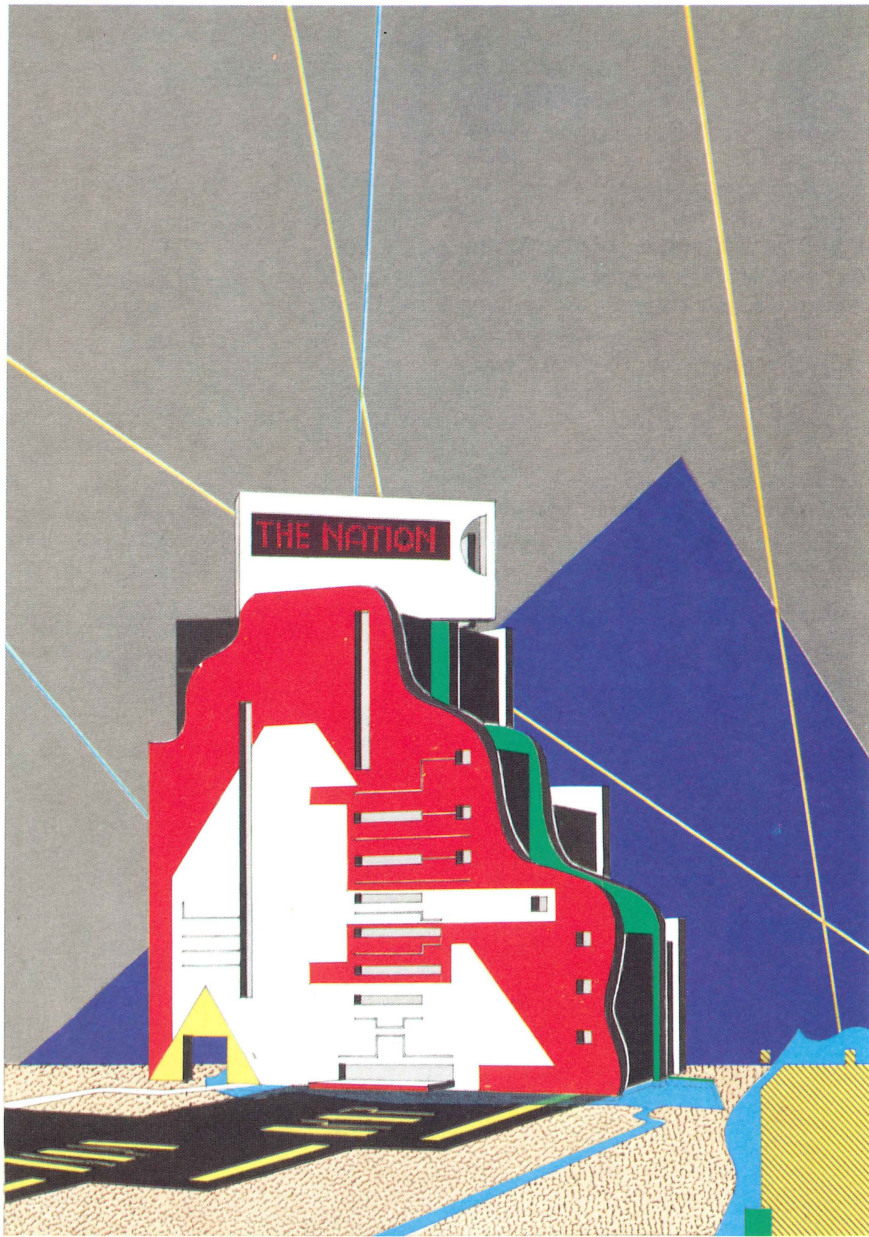
Ground floor plan



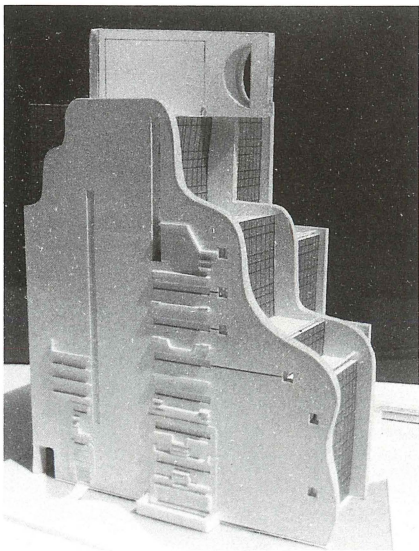
Second floor plan



Fifth floor plan



North-east view of the Nation Building (preliminary study model).



Sumet Jumsai is a leading architect in private practice in South-East Asia. He is also an author of many articles and forthcoming books on the region.

