

# Co-operative housing design: experiences from Thailand

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## Ten Bangkok

This is a co-operative housing project implemented by CASE Architects founded in 1997 and I'm one of the owners of the house in this project. CASE has been working with the urban poor communities doing a lot of participatory design with slum dwellers and informal settlements more than ten years, but now its focus had shifted to the middle-class. The question and significance of the project came from that in Thailand, if you're rich, you don't have any problems finding a house. Also if you are poor, you can get subsidise from the government like the Baan Man Kong project, a program that the government provides fund in the co-operative form. If you are poor and you organise yourselves together as a co-operative then you can apply for the loan to build your house and pay at a very low interest rate. But if you're the middle class- you're not rich enough and you're not poor enough, you would fall into a kind of big hole there and end up having nowhere out. So we, the house owners of TEN Bangkok, are friends, friends of friends and most of us are community architects working with poor communities. And it's like a joke telling to friends that we have been helping many poor people, building their houses but we don't have our own houses or some of poor people houses even look better than my rented room, for example. We kept joking that there were money for the poor, but for the young graduates like us we didn't have any solutions. So that is why we came together. We thought that we would have kind of collective power. If we formed a group, the strength would be more powerful and perhaps we could do something. That is why we, individuals who share a vision for alternative housing and the way of living, gathered to initiate this project. I would like to make it clear that I like my friends. I like my neighbour, the one living next to me. But it's not like I like him so much or oh I want to live with him so badly. I may not like them as much as they don't like me. But it was because I didn't have other choices and we have to stay together, to survive. It isn't that kind of romantic that oh we want to live together so much. It's not like that at all.

The methodology was that we divided a piece of land into ten plots of 5x25 metres. The location is at the outskirts of Bangkok, very close to the new airport, which means the site is very far! If you've visited Thailand you would have known how far it is. But the reason why we bought the land there was because it was affordable. That's the main reason.

We have four architects, one lawyer, one designer and normal people. When I said normal I meant they're non-architect and they are normal...(laughter). Though we share the same life style, we are also different. It was so fun when we designed together because we did the same methodology that we did with the poor in the communities.

We were given a 4x25 plot and we designed our houses separately and then we put houses together, that became very political and diplomatic. As we didn't say who stay with whom, somehow my house was put next to that of the guy who nobody likes him at all. I didn't like to live next to him either. But, I couldn't move it for weeks. Later, I had to gossip with the one that is more powerful in our group to move my house to the other plot. We did this with the poor many times but when it came to our

situation. It was quite difficult in reality. The design doesn't look really go together. It looked mad and crazy. The roofs didn't even have the same angles but we just left them that way. There were many negotiations among the neighbours. I share courtyard with my neighbour. Someone has open kitchen that anyone can use.

There were many difficulties. We had to negotiate who is going to share what, with whom. This is also the first project ever implemented in Thailand. There's no financial program to support this kind of project. Well, if you're the poor, you can get loan as a cooperative, quite a common thing to do. But if you are the middle-class, there's no any scheme to apply for the loan. The bank wouldn't believe that your friends could pay the mortgage for you if you couldn't. Nobody believes that because you're the middle-class. So, at the end CASE as a company asked for the loan from the bank, then we, the owners, pay money to CASE indirectly. There's difficulty in the construction process as well. Each house has different styles, and levels. CASE therefore needs to run its own construction team called CON-CASE to build this project. Another difficulty is the building regulation. This is a pilot project. There's no building regulation for co-operative houses. The official didn't know how to categorise this kind of housing. It's not one house, not row house, detached house. It doesn't fit into any types of the existing regulation.

As you can see from the plan, we have nine plots left. Each house is here and there's shared space. So we ended up with asking the permission as one house. I guess the officer must have closed his eyes and signed the permission for us to build the project.

We have share facilities, such as organic plantation, parking lots, swimming pool. If I live on my own, I wouldn't be able to have this swimming pool in my life. We also share the courtyard which makes the place looks very nice. There's also shared kitchen that we can use and the owner doesn't mind. I don't know why but people on the right seem a bit younger and on the left hand side are a bit older generation living with family. I have my rooftop but I don't have stair to access it. I have to go to my rooftop through my neighbour's house.

The design stage didn't take much time, around a year or so. But the construction took quite long time, from 2004-2008 to get completed. That is not because of the design but because..it took 2 years to get the loan from the bank, and 1.5 year to build.

The construction is quite complicated and we couldn't find anyone to build for us at the time. So CASE set up a construction team, by doing it ourselves. CASE hires workers and built a camp for them to live on the site. We also hired a retired engineer to give lecture to the workers like some basic safety. We also had visitors from National Housing Authority, from Architectural schools. That made the workers quite proud of what they were doing. They felt like they were a part of something quite unique. We also put the model of the house at the site as well. So the workers would know what they were working on.

The workers' camp itself is another form of cooperative. We put like CDs, construction techniques, café at the centre of the camp. Also workers needed to put money cooperatively to buy some utilities, food. For Thai standard, I think this camp looked quite organised and quite clean. There's also playground for the kids.

We used lot of recycle material in the project too. This was not meant to be be cool but because we didn't have enough budget to pay for the new doors, window frames.

When we started moving in, we still faced many problems. Some friends argued with others about the communal expenses. There's problem of transparency, corruption like basic issues we found in the poor. The middle-class also has the same problems.

At my neighbour's house, he painted his wall as a black-board aimed at using it to teach Art, English or whatever for some kids around. So we planned that there might be some activities organised after the project finishes.

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### Q&A session

**Q: Can you explain more in details, how did you deal with the situation when someone left the project and sold his house? Do you have any rules in organising this co-operative housing? How do you manage about the ownership?**

S: Yes, we have community rules and regulations like all urban poor would have. For example, if you want to sell your plot, you have to bring the new tenants to the interview. We have to interview them, who are they? are they good-looking, are they funny?...no no not like that (laughter)... but the point is that we get to know them better, to know who they are. We can't just to sell the house on the market and anyone can move in. The design itself is really a shared place, physically and psychologically. So we need to know them very well.

The ownership is a good question. Before, CASE- as a company- owns the whole plot. Due to the difficulty in financial program, in building regulation, CASE later has to own this. But then some house owners felt insecure about that. We paid a million baths without legal paper or anything, but because we paid to a friend, let's say. But when it reached millions, they started to feel...well, maybe friendship isn't worth that much...some thought like that which is understandable, but CASE didn't do this project to trick us to pay them like that. This kind of distrust however happened. So nowadays each of us owns our plot. Now I own my plot and we have our own house registration number, telephone number etc. Ownership becomes individual but we share the facilities. We pay communal fee every month.

**Q: How much does each house cost?**

S: Each house costs differently. My house costs around 2 millions baths (around £40,000). For the whole project, we got 10 million-bath loan but of course it costs more than that.

**Q: to compare the price with normal houses?**

S: Actually this project costs a little bit less. But it supposed to cost less than this actually. At the beginning, we estimated that perhaps we could save around 50%. But we ended up saving like 20% I would say. But the better thing is that we can share courtyard here and be able to design our own houses. It's better than buying anything available on the market. For me it's worth that way.

**Q: Are there any other project like this in Bangkok? Or you are the only one?**

S: Yes only one.

Q: And will there be another?

S: There should be. We would like to use this project as a pilot project. Therefore, we have invited many lecturers, officers from National Housing Authority to visit our project. Perhaps if they like the idea, they can do it themselves, or hiring CASE Architect to do as consultant if they'd like to. CASE can also act as facilitator too. We aimed at using this as a pilot project that anyone...five friends, ten friends, if they can work together can also do the same thing.

Q: Also for the bank in terms of funding, and the future projects. With that money it would be worth

S: Yes, that would be better. After the project proves that it is possible, I would say the bank should feel more secure about this project. But again, nowadays there's no financial program supporting co-operative housing for the middle class. We are still small and we couldn't change the Thai financial structure. I don't know how we will do it in the future though. There are a lot of mistakes regarding the legal and financial aspect of the project. For example, as you can see the shared area actually blocked the entrance and exit of the plot. When we submitted the plan to the bank, it estimated the price as very low because there's no way out to the public land...we call it like the blind plot (in Thai). The cost per square metre would be very low.

Q: Is there any framework for size of the house/ land in the case that you put this scheme on the market?

S: It depends. There's no framework for the design. The only framework that we had here was 4x4 metre grid. So, it can also be other options to suit the need of the clients, inhabitants.

Q: Can you change or adapt it?

S: We can, but it needs to be negotiated with the neighbour. Some people asked me what if my neighbour would sell the house to someone else or let it. But I would say who will buy your house anyway. As it's very unique because of the owners' style, for example, my neighbour has an open toilet.

Q: Well, in case some people get married and would like to move out, what will you deal with that?

S: That's possible. It may happen and I can't answer that at the moment. I don't know. We may have to negotiate.

Q: Are there any issues/ problems similar to the participatory design for the urban poor?

S: Well, yes there are many problems right now since we started moving in to live together. We realised that when we worked as community architects, though we called ourselves as facilitator, we push them - the urban poor, asking that why they don't work together, why they don't negotiate, why they don't give up a little bit, be less selfish...like that, bla bla bla. But when it comes to our own houses, we realise that it's not easy, very very difficult. Just to have a new security guard, for example, became such a big thing. So many fights happened. When we worked as community architects working with the poor, we asked why they don't love each other or they don't work together. But when we do it ourselves like this, it really takes a lot of mindset that actually it's really difficult.

Q: You mentioned that you own your plot, what if you sell it on the market, where will the money go to?

S: To my account.

Q: But you originally called it cooperative housing?

S: It's difficult to say. As the urban poor programme, the projects are implemented by CODI, a non-government organisation. People own the land cooperatively because CODI is afraid that the poor would sell the house to others and it'll cause more problems. In the beginning, we said we would do the co-operative housing. We didn't do much research on legal issues or financial loan, perhaps. However, everyone made clear at the beginning that we wanted to own our plot individually and we wanted to share some space and facilities.

Q: You mentioned about a communal kitchen. How would that work?

S: Um, actually it's my friend kitchen. I have my own kitchen and actually each plot has its own kitchen. For me, for example, I may not be a good cook. I may use her kitchen from time to time, but it's not like I would cook there every day. It's actually her kitchen. She's kind to share it with others. But the swimming pool and the organic plantation and the parking space are owned cooperatively, by all of us, not individually.

Q: How did you work with the form on 4x4 grid?

S: We didn't have any structure for the form. Each of us had 4x4 and designed our own house. Then we put it together and we drew the plan. We knew that it would cost us a lot if we didn't work on modular system at all. So we didn't try so many forms.

Q: Will there be any extension on the site, beyond TEN?

S: Yes, of course it could happen. We didn't think that far yet actually but it's definitely possible to extend.

Q: What cost do you have to pay for the facilities and the maintenance?

S: We pay for...security guard who does the watering for plant as well. And we just changed the guard though. For me, my neighbour helps me to take care of paying bills and watering my plants informally. But we do have some certain rules...like we hire the company to take care of the swimming pool. It comes every 2 weeks. For the maintenance, each owner takes care of their houses. At the beginning, CASE Architect did the job for us. If there's something didn't work out in the house, CASE would change it.

Q: Do you have regular meeting?

S: Yes, we try to have meeting every month, but again people are too busy as usual as working with the urban poor. Sometimes it's very difficult to have a meeting. We just do the emailing instead.

**Q: Do you have any roles for the organising the project?**

S: You meant like the head of cooperative. Not really, but informally we have a founder of CASE Architect who is living here as well. She's some kind of informal leader taking care of this project, to get it completed. So she is more or less the leader but we didn't say that we appointed her to be the leader as such. So it's kind of very blurred and informal way of organising.

**Q: If people continue to adapt and change their houses, will there be any rules for that?**

S: It's actually quite open to be adapted. Perhaps my neighbour would have a second floor, more rooms. That's quite acceptable. Again, we do need to negotiate amongst the members though.

**Q: So what's the meaning of this number- TEN?**

S: Actually the number TEN got inspiration from TEN Osaka, Japan. It stands for a ten plots of land. TEN Osaka is for the poor in Japan. The project was done by CASE Japan, a friend group of CASE Thailand. It was founded a few years after CASE Thailand. Here we kept the word TEN, although we have only nine plots left.

DP: There's an issue of the structure of community, size and space. It could be smaller.

S: Yes, it could be any sizes as long as it is manageable.

TS: Yeah, when it extends and people get together and it would be hard to say what the good size is, whether it's too big already or too small. You have to negotiate the boundary as well.

S: yes, it depends on who they are and how they work together as well. So I can't give the exact number or how big it should be.

**Q: What about the ages of people living there?**

S: The people on the right hand side seem to be younger, more adventure. Those on the other side are older. But it's not actually the separation. They are friends and friends of a friend, that kind of relationship. I and my friend and my neighbour are friend and come from one generation while they are from older generation. So informally somehow it seems like division but not really. Not like two groups of people And you can go to that courtyard from this one, so no wall here. Although they are at the same age and share similar lifestyle, again there's still a conflict going on between them. It happens. It's hard to say. I don't know if they can move or change to the other houses.

**Q: In terms of community, what does work and what does not?**

S: It's hard to say. I guess it depends on time as well. Time changes, people change too somehow.

**Q: Are you happy with it? Any advantage?**

S: Yes, I am. Though there're many problems, conflicts and difficulties. We also learned a lot from that. I think it's good to learn and you don't have to be much romanticised. I would not be able to have such a house with 2 million baths. I wouldn't be able to have a shared courtyard or swimming pool, a good quality of space or share facilities. At the conceptual level, living with my neighbours with my friends, I feel safe. I can leave my house to my neighbour to take care of it. I feel safe to be there.

Q: is there the gate there when you said about security guard? How does it connect to the surrounding area? Is there any existing community there? Who are your neighbour?

S: There's a small gate here and solid wall around. The other side is a narrow canal that you can jump. Neighbours are mixed, low-middle class.

Q: Does this project change anything in the neighbourhood?

S: I haven't lived there all the time so I'm not quite sure about the impact. But I'm sure the unique appearance would make people curious. But it would be nice if they are talking about it and are interested. So far, I've not heard anything about conflict with neighbourhood.

DP: As a community architect, somehow you engage in the political agenda. Do you think this project is political in anyways?

S: I would say yes and we would like to use this as a catalyst to raise questions about financial program, to raise questions to the government, the bank, or the market. We faced many difficulty and we wrote many articles in magazine. In so doing we'd like to make it political as you said for the middle class, for cooperative housing, for cooperative design, for community architect. Of course, we need to do things by ourselves but we also need supports from the bigger hands, top-down and the bottom up somehow. We can operate things from the bottom but we also need supports from the bank, the market or the government. I think it's political in different levels, like individually, as a group and as a project. There were people like experts on housing who criticised that this project couldn't have happened.

DP: I'm also wondering if it's possible to have a project for not only housing for the middle-class but as a mixed community, and where and how that community could happen.

S: Yeah, like TEN Osaka, it's only a project for the poor. The idea of mixed community is quite interesting but I think it depends on who they are as well.

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