

SLAM EASE, IF YOU PLEASE

Transplanted historic houses, 1,000sq ft rooms, exclusive Muay Thai training and a private antiques collection: Maria Shollenbarger reports on how The Siam aims to transform the luxury-hotel landscape in Bangkok.

What happens when a Thai rock star, an architect of international renown, a three-acre parcel of prime river-front real estate in Bangkok and dozens upon dozens of 19th- and early-20th-century Sino-European antiques come together?

Jason Friedman, manager of The Siam – the 39-suite resort hotel in the Thai capital's elegant Dusit neighbourhood, which will open in June – is walking me through its grounds and attempting to explain this seemingly unlikely collusion, while I admire the stunning results.

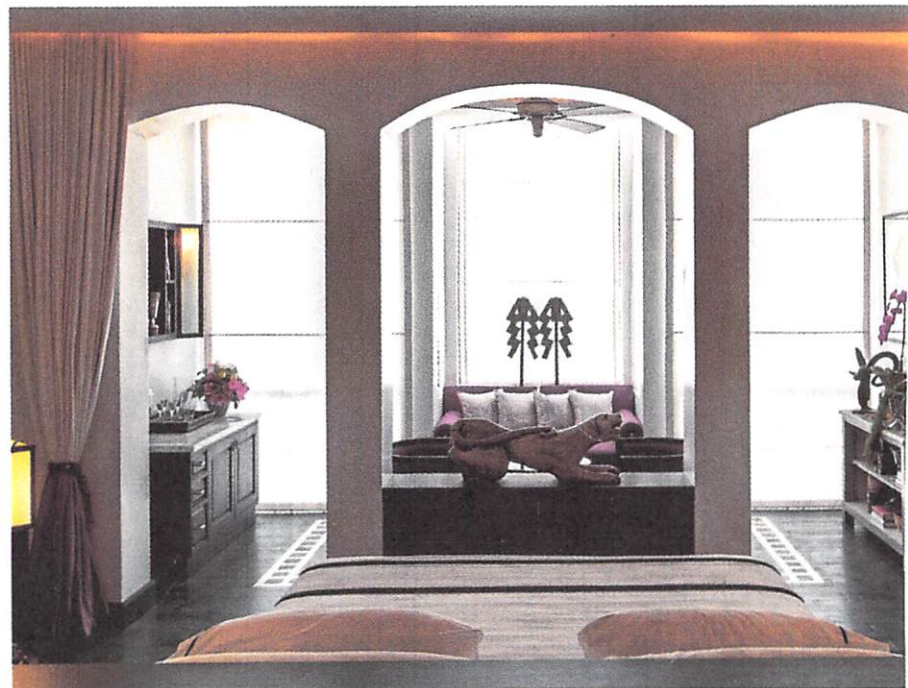
It goes thus: the rock star is Krissada (Kriss) Sukosol, whose Western analogue would be someone along the lines of James Blunt; pin-up handsome, talented, he happens to also be a scion of an

established Bangkok family who are holders of a fortune made in electronics, and of Sukosol Hotels, a four-star hospitality concern. (Kamala Sukosol, the matriarch, is president; her daughters Marisa and Daranee are executive vice president and chief financial officer, respectively; their brother Sukie is project director; and Kriss is design director.) The verdant riverside plot, surrounded by the villas of the city's privileged and within striking distance of the Grand Palace, has belonged to the Sukosols for about 40 years.

The architect is Bill Bensley, a Harvard-trained Canadian (by way of a southern Californian childhood), who has spent most of his adult life in Thailand designing and building the kind of extravagantly romantic five-star resorts that are the *raison d'être* of the travel glossies' Hot Lists: the Four Seasons Tented Camp and the Anantara Golden Triangle, both in Chiang Rai; the

St Regis Bali; Maia, in the Seychelles; Hôtel de la Paix in Siem Reap; the Oberoi Rajvilas and Amarvilas, and scores (literally) of others.

The prodigious antiques collection belongs to Sukosol, and has been sourced all over Thailand – from top private dealers to dubious-looking stalls at Chatuchak Market and many places in-between. “How did I come to be involved in this project?” asks Bensley rhetorically. “Shopping. I’m a collector, so is Kriss. This thing happened over and over whereby I’d find a piece I had to have, and I’d see a ‘Sold’ sticker on it, always with his name attached.” When the two met socially, Bensley learned that Sukosol

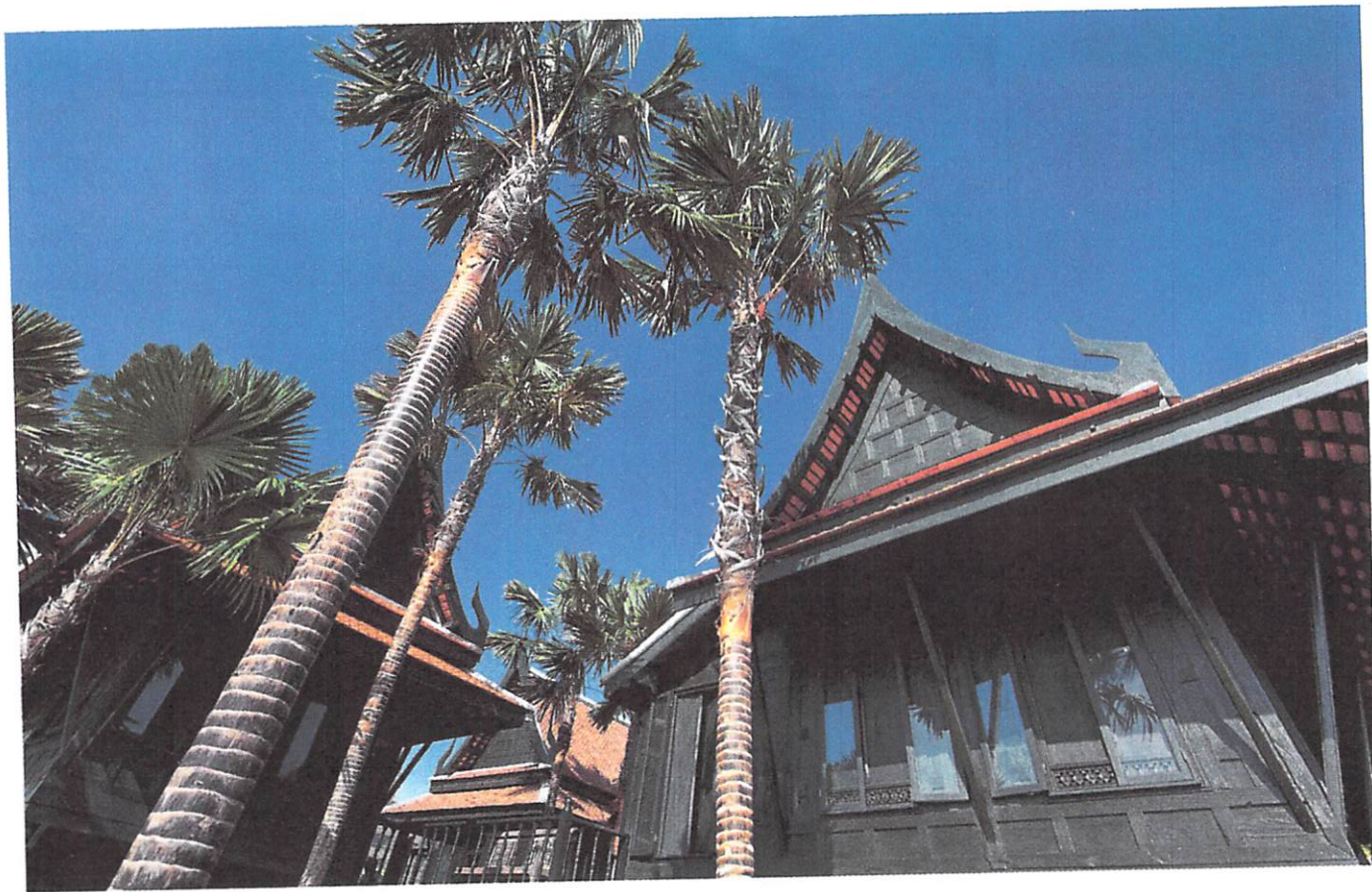




The lobby at The Siam
hotel in Bangkok. Below:
the hotel's Maenam Suite.

had had the identical experience: "He kept finding things he loved, only to see 'Sold to Bensley' stickers on them."

A charming anecdote, but Bensley also learned that the Sukosols had the land, and a certain idea about a different kind of hotel. "It's very unusual for a client and I to have such similar personal sensibilities. The jumping-off point, and the driving force behind this entire project, is that shared taste – specifically in Rama V [the reformist king whose European tours in 1897 and 1907 brought Western influences to Siamese architecture and art] objects and antiques," he says. Sukosol concurs: "The approach was to build a home that reflected passion for Siamese culture and history. Bill has shaped and moulded my collection, and brought it to life in the most nostalgic setting." By all parties' accounts, money has, more or less, been no object. One is inclined to respond



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From top: traditional Thai architecture at The Siam. The hotel's Chinese Villa bedroom. The pool and bathers' bar area.



with cynicism to this claim, until one takes a walk round The Siam.

The hotel itself may have just 39 suites (the smallest of which clocks in at 80sq m), but it is vast, of soaring and genteel proportions, a nostalgic nod to bygone Siamese grandeur: white walls, matte-black blinds, glowing polished tropical woods and cobbled brick courtyards already fetchingly patterned by moisture. Seen from the road, The Siam appears deceptively modest, but its tall white buildings open one onto another in an intriguing and increasingly private procession from the street entrance to the riverside lawn and private dock; one passes through double- and triple-height atria in which Boriphat ferns, palms, orchids and pink lotus abound and water elements trickle and burble.

From the planted entrance courtyard (bookended by two delightfully old-school teak reception desks, complete with rows of cubbyholes for guests' post), to the spa's 850sq ft treatment suites (each with private terrace), everywhere one looks there are stunning – sometimes museum quality – turn-of-the-last-century antiques, art works, curiosities and architectural elements. (Sukosol's collection comprises about 70 per cent of the furnishings and decor; the rest have been custom-designed by Bensley.) Rather than showcased, they are

integrated seamlessly into the design; guests will sit on them, open and close them, probably place their drinks on them. "It was very important to Kriss that all these things have their proper context, that they be objects people use and enjoy," says Friedman. Room after room is populated by lacquered consoles, mahogany-framed mirrors, carved finials and stonework, intricate caning, sepia-toned photographs of Thai aristocrats and military personnel, and mounted silk panels. Doors along the corridor of the main building are Sino-Portuguese, circa 1910; a sinuous Thonet bench in pristine condition abuts a carved easel supporting a 1925 map of Bangkok in the pool bar; a life-size wood carving of a reclining mother and child, chanced upon in Chiang Mai, sits in a corner of the hotel's Thai restaurant, Chon.

Chon is a story in itself, housed in three antique teakwood cottages that are

bona fide pieces of history: from 1959 until 2000 they belonged to Connie Mangskau, the socialite, antiques dealer and close friend of the American businessman (and one-time Office of Strategic Services operative) Jim Thompson, credited with revitalising the Thai silk industry in the 1950s and 60s. Mangskau and Thompson bought several such houses in Ayutthaya, about 40 miles to the north, dismantled them and shipped them down the Chao Praya river to Bangkok. Thompson creatively reassembled six into the house in which he lived until his disappearance in 1967 (it is now a museum); then helped Mangskau to assemble hers. After her death, they were sold to a family friend, who later sold them to Kamala Sukosol. Bensley has arranged them along the lawn's edge, next to the river. All are raised on their traditional stilts; the smallest houses the chef's table and

cooking school on its ground floor. A fourth has been remade as a hotel suite.

Palpable heritage interwoven with contemporary opulence: it is the physical backdrop to a place that also promises an experiential difference. Enter Friedman, who was enlisted by Bensley (the two had opened the Four Seasons Tented Camp in Chiang Mai together, and Friedman has over a decade of form at resorts and hotels across Asia). His mission is perfect experiences: the hotel's second restaurant is a "comfort-food" bistro ("Our guest can have Daniel or Joël Robuchon whenever he or she wants; it's about perfectly executed simplicity"); Friedman dedicated weeks to finding a baker who could produce bagels that met his standards.

It goes without saying Friedman will offer yoga, cooking classes, private tours and personal services of all sorts. The competition boasts these as well; bespoke Muay Thai programmes, however, are an amenity The Siam would seem to have the corner on. "Here's this sport that's so distinctly Thai, which is also a worldwide phenomenon," says Friedman. "And there was nothing in Bangkok that's set up for a first-rate experience of all aspects of Muay Thai – spiritual, physical, mental and the spectacle." Thus The Siam's gym is fitted with a full-size competition ring and training equipment. Yoga regimens, spa treatments, and menus will be created around guests' individual training programmes; they will learn from the city's top talent, and have VIP access to public matches, meeting the fighters privately. "These are inaccessible experiences – except through us," Friedman says. "Luxury is access."

Luxury is lots of things The Siam has, actually – beauty, privacy, space, fine objects imbued with meaning. It's all in the mix, as unlikely collusions sometimes prove. ♦

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