

Clunky with a Twist



The oddly shaped Bangkok Central Embassy merges a seven-storey retail podium and a 36-storey hotel tower.

Text
Giovanna Dunmall

Photos
AL_A

When

London-based AL_A was commissioned to build a 140,000-m² shopping mall and hotel complex in the centre of Bangkok, the predominant concern was how to turn the generic podium and tower typology into something altogether more interesting, nuanced and complex. 'How could we subvert that typology?' recalls Amanda Levete, who founded the practice in 2009. 'How could we reconcile those two very different forms?'

The high-end complex is located in a section of the British Embassy's gardens (sold off in 2006 in one of the most expensive real estate deals in Thai history) and overlooks the city's main commercial artery, Ploenchit Road, on the other side. Given that this was the largest project AL_A had built anywhere in the world, the practice was keen to create something expressive in a city that despite being 'vibrant and colourful' is rather less exciting when it comes to the built environment. 'Most of the contemporary architecture is quite mediocre,' says Levete. 'You could be anywhere.' But first the architects had to deal with a variety of challenges and constraints.

One was that a large percentage of the mall's façade would have to be an opaque blank wall. 'That is just the nature of the programmes of these buildings,' says Levete. 'But how do you articulate that? How do you give it a grain and make it human? How do you break down that mass?' Another challenge was the building code restrictions regarding views, boundaries and the right to light. 'So you couldn't do a super-tall elegant tower for instance,' explains Levete. 'The proportions were by definition a bit clunky.'

The practice responded to all these questions by creating a twisted, shimmering geometry that looped around two light wells and merged the functions and programme of a seven-storey luxury retail mall and a 36-storey five-star hotel tower into one elegant and sinuous whole. To resolve the problem

'I am only interested in software as a tool to do what you want'

of large windowless expanses, the architects decided to cover the entire plinth in a series of metallic shingles.

The inspiration came partly from previous projects (as one half of experimental practice Future Systems Levete had, back in 2003, overlaid the skin of the organic-shaped Selfridges department store in Birmingham with aluminium discs to create a grain and texture), but also from a specific Baroque church in Italy. 'The Gesù Nuovo in Naples has this pyramidal carved stone façade, which picks up light and shadow in a really beautiful way,' says Levete. 'It transforms a very massive structure into something much more subtle.' With the Bangkok project she wanted to 'achieve that same quality'.

The architects' next move was to spend time researching Thai crafts, such as basket-weaving and pattern-making, and the country's great tradition of temples with shingle roofs. Initially, they considered cladding the entire structure in ceramic tiles. 'But the volumes were so huge and there were issues of control and consistency so it became too complicated,' says Levete. The practice needed a lighter, simpler and cheaper material, so a system

of shingles made of extruded aluminium and manufactured by international building contractor Permasteelisa (famous for working on many of Frank Gehry's buildings) was developed for the project. The 300,000-plus shingles were folded at three different points so that the top half reflected the sky and the bottom half reflected the busy city. 'By mixing the tiles you create this incredible visual complexity and a kind of moiré effect with a very low-tech solution,' explains Levete.

This level of detail within a fairly simple system is something that roots the project in its place according to Levete. 'In Europe or the US you wouldn't be able to afford the labour to affix these thousands of tiles, but in Asia you can because the socioeconomic conditions are almost the reverse of those in the West; technology is very expensive and labour is very cheap.'

The rich and dynamic pattern and rhythm of the building was the result of a computer program that positioned the tiles so that the twisting geometry of the building was underlined and the line of the tower as it comes round and merges into the plinth was accentuated. 'The pattern was both random >

The project is located on Ploenchit Road, Bangkok's primary commercial artery.



The curvaceous interior geometry creates certain trajectories from one atrium to another and from one escalator to another.



The 300,000-plus extruded aluminium tiles were folded at three different points. Their distribution creates a moiré-like pattern.



and inherently self-organizing,' says Alice Dietsch, project leader and one of the three directors of the practice. In other words, it 'followed a rule generated by those lines'.

Though digital software contributed to the making of this building (as it has in other AL_A projects, notably the pattern of the stunning all-porcelain courtyard that the practice created for the upcoming Victoria & Albert museum extension in London), Leveté is clear that software should not ever be more than an enabler. 'There are a lot of practices for whom software is a driver by itself, but I am only interested in it insofar as it's a tool to use to do what you want,' she says.

'I like the fact that this project has an element of craftsmanship to its construction,' she continues, 'the fact that we didn't use pre-cast cladding panels and that the tiles were put on individually.' The tiles were clipped on to 10 x 10-m façade panels off-site. The fact that such visual sumptuousness and drama was achieved with just three types of tile is a testament to the cleverness of the building's design. 'You get the illusion of even greater variation because the massing changes, so it picks up the light differently,' explains Dietsch.

Inside the shopping mall the architects continued to play with the building's figure-of-eight geometry to create interest, drama and diversity. 'Instead of two vertical atriums we started to merge them so you move from one atrium to the other and they seem to overlap,' explains Dietsch. 'It's a bit as if you took a shopping mall with two light wells and kind of shook it.' By creating other perforations in the ceiling, more daylight was introduced, and 'the illusion that the atrium is moving from one side to another was created'. Recessed lighting was used to enhance the dynamic quality of the sculptural floor interiors.

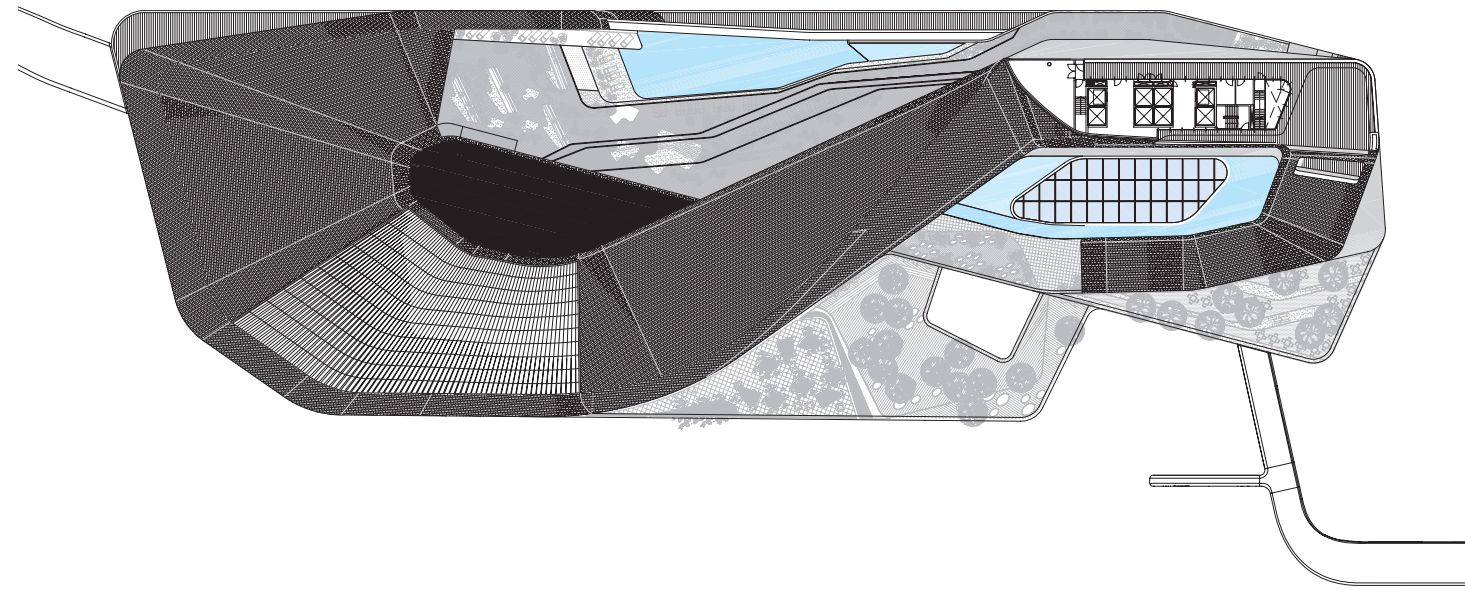
Aside from taking the interiors out of the realm of the generic, this curvaceous, irregular indoor geometry enables glimpses of the six terraces dotted around the building

and the gleaming seamless and smooth glass-and-aluminium tower above. It also, as Dietsch points out, triggers circulation. 'It creates certain trajectories from one atrium to another and from one escalator to another,' she says, 'and turns the visitor's journey into a sort of promenade.' AL_A purposely kept the material palette simple and pragmatic inside – hand-formed plasterboard was used to create the contoured balconies – but the quality of the finishes is high (someone from AL_A was there for half of every month to monitor progress). 'I don't think we would have achieved the same detailing if we hadn't had a presence on site,' says Dietsch. 'It meant shortcuts were avoided.'

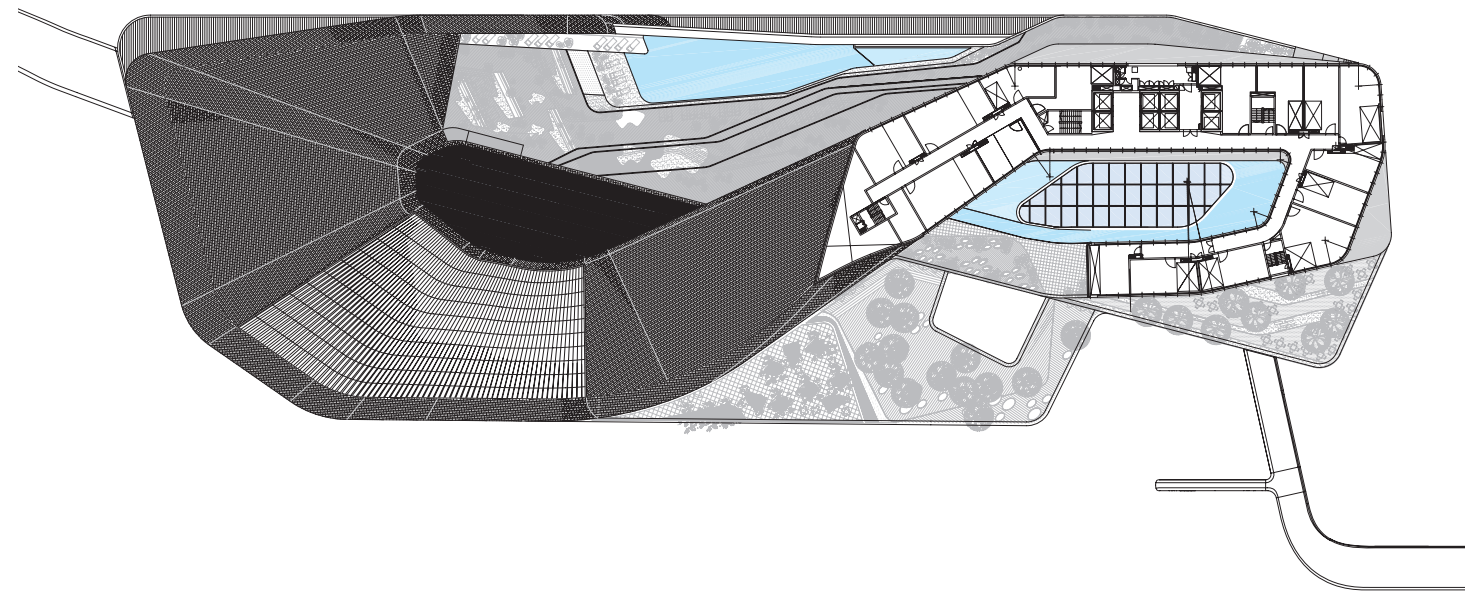
This summer sees the final phase in the Central Embassy project, with the opening of the Park Hyatt Hotel in the tower

(with interiors designed by Yabu Pushelberg). Despite being built during a period of great political and economic instability and turmoil (and delayed as a result), the building can be deemed a huge success. A reflective metallic cladding on a building of such a vast size could have been merely ostentatious or superficial in different hands; the merging of building forms might also have been amorphous. Yet Central Embassy is a sophisticated and defined entity that offers drama and presence while remaining human and permeable. Its digitally crafted exteriors are rich (in ways that have nothing to do with money) and endlessly beguiling. — ala.uk.com

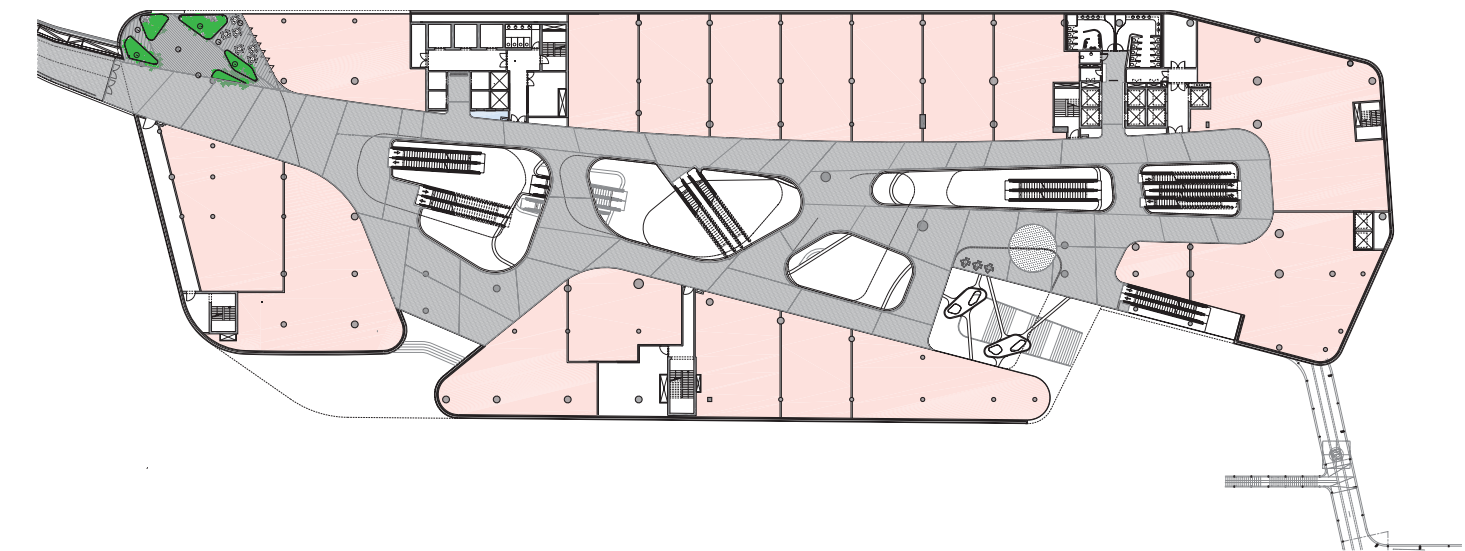
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The tiles for the façade were clipped on to panels off-site.

‘How do you break down that mass?’

South elevation

