



Backyard brutalism

Faced with a brief for a small house for two siblings to be built on a plot behind their existing family home, **BANGKOK**-based architects **THINGSMATTER** turned to an unlikely source for inspiration.

TEXT ANDREA O'DRISCOLL | PHOTOGRAPHY PIRAK ANURAKYAWACHON



Raw, exposed concrete might not be the first building material that springs to mind when you think of small, flexible living spaces in suburban settings. But for Bangkok architects ThingsMatter it was the first and only choice for the house they came to call ReBrute.

Used to great effect in the Brutalist architecture of the fifties, sixties and seventies to suggest power and permanence for large-scale government and institutional clients, concrete is by nature strong, stable and commanding. What's most surprising about ReBrute (named in acknowledgement of the raw, unfinished *béton brut* concrete walls that define the space) is how well it works within its suburban environment and how warm and airy the finished house feels.

Commissioned by Muay Parivudhiphongs, a photographer, designer and founder of the design brand Taxidermy (and a friend of one of the architects), the house needed to accommodate living space for her and her younger brother as well as a studio and bedroom for each of them.

Architect Tom Dannecker explains that this design is the second they produced for Muay. "My business partner Savinee Buranasilapin and Muay have been friends since the early 2000s when both of them returned to Bangkok after years abroad. We actually designed a different house for her early on, but starting

her own business intervened, and it was never built. Half a decade later, she was ready to build, but her needs had changed; her business had grown and she'd be sharing this house with her brother. We started over, and the result is a much better house than that first one would have been."

The plot is just 5.2 metres by 19.6 metres and stretches along one side of the garden of the family house. Finding ways to incorporate the existing house proved to be one of the biggest design challenges. "It was difficult to find the right way to approach the older house," Tom says. "It doesn't have historical or architectural value, or even much sentiment attached to it. It will be replaced long before the new house we designed, so it would have been silly to match it or treat it too preciously. At the same time, it's a perfectly useful house with people living in it."

The resulting design incorporates three distinct spaces enclosed by four thick, raw concrete walls. The middle section is the biggest and double height. It's intended as a flexible living space that can function as a living room, dining room and entrance hall. On either side of it are the siblings' studios, accessed via specially designed steel doors, with their own private bedrooms above them.

The thick, concrete walls allowed for the kitchen, bathrooms and storage closets to be recessed within them and are capped by a steel roof structure supporting a thin corrugated







ABOVE | STAIRS WITHIN A CONCRETE MASS ARE CAST WITH WALLS AND COUNTERTOP; STAIRS ACROSS THE VOID ARE BENT FROM STEEL.
OPPOSITE | A STAIR-BRIDGE ACROSS THE LIVING ROOM IS DETAILED AS A PIECE OF LIGHTWEIGHT FURNITURE.



metal roof that seems to float above the building. Strips of striated polycarbonate panels (employed in part because they are lighter and cheaper than glass) help bring in light and contrast nicely with the dense, solid walls.

The central living space opens up on either side via sliding aluminium windows, which add a welcome sense of dynamism to the design. This flexibility also allows ReBrute to work within its environment and meet the needs of the client and her family. "As a designed object, ReBrute is freestanding, with an assertively distinct appearance, but as a social space, it's an extension," explains Tom. "It lets the younger generation have its own space and identity, while not entirely rejecting the local tradition of extended families living together."

There's a similar principle behind the bespoke panels of wooden slats, which help manage the natural light and, together with the interior blinds and external foliage, enable the brother and sister to create a sense of privacy as desired without compromising the airiness of the central space, and to open it up when they prefer.

The natural wood also helps to balance the concrete walls, but the space is further softened by a few elements that suggest the natural world in surprising ways. The steel bridge which connects the two bedrooms is painted blue to echo the sky, while the form of the staircase which links it to the central living space was derived from the structure of a tree outside in the garden.

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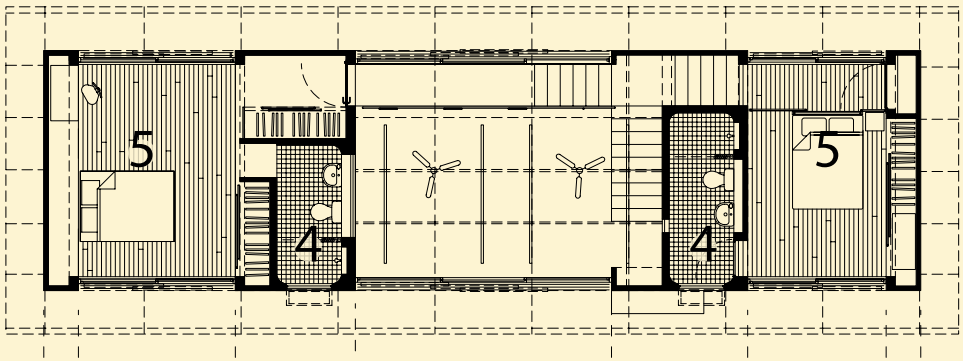


Not that the house was designed to blend seamlessly into the natural world. It was always intended to be more of an expression of human industry than a reflection of the environment.

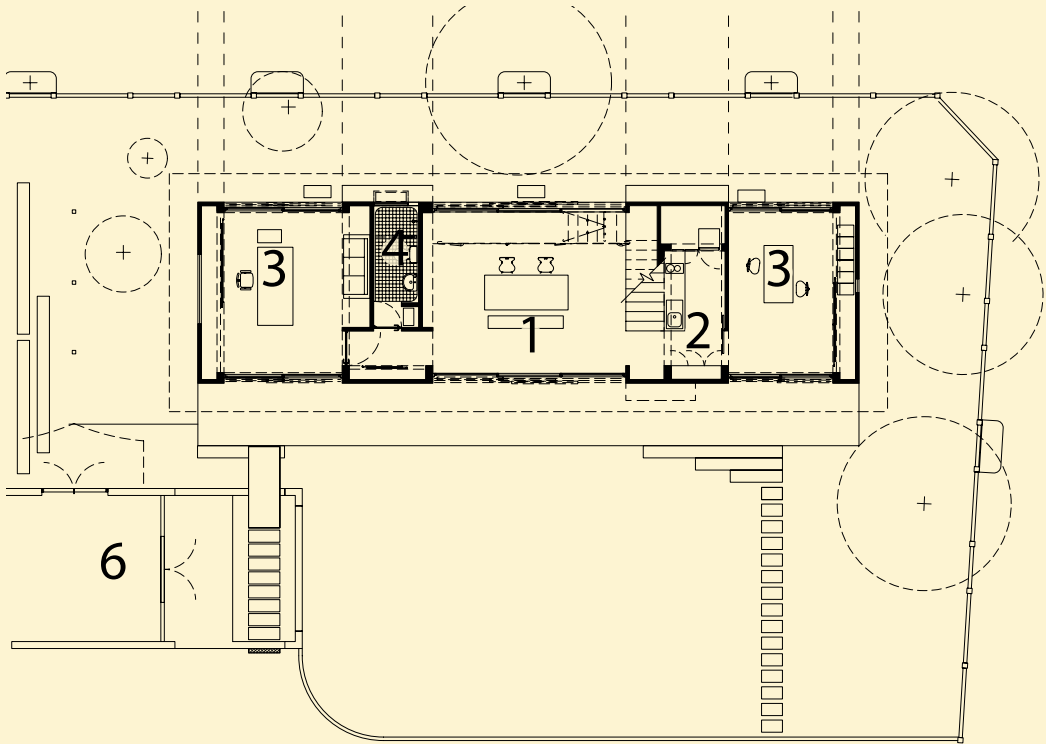
The bridge and staircase might contain elements of their natural surroundings but they remain inherently industrial objects, sharply cast in metal. Similarly, the rawness of the concrete walls is an honest representation of their construction process, right down to the air bubbles, exposed aggregate, drips and mis-pours that give them their unique texture and character.

Creating their distinct, rough-hewn look did cause a few headaches, however. “Honestly, the concrete texture was an ongoing source of anxiety,” Tom says. “While béton brut has a rich tradition in Western modernism, its transparent logic is contrary to the aesthetic sensibilities of Thai culture, which prizes smooth, finished surfaces above all else. Our client understood, and remarkably, she found a contractor who understood it too. But would the neighbours, or the extended family?”

They also had to rely on individual contractors to translate their vision, and while not all of them interpreted it as the architects might have liked, the variations and differences ended up adding to the whole effect. “We all grew to love the wall textures in all their disarray.



UPPER FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR

1	LIVING ROOM	4	BATHROOM
2	KITCHEN	5	BEDROOM
3	WORKROOM	6	EXISTING HOUSE



The surfaces are a registration of much more than the properties of the banal building materials that went into them. They say something about the people who made it, and the relationships between all of us. The texture ends up being a lot more poetic, and more inseparable from the design of the house, than we had consciously intended.”

The houses and apartment buildings that surround ReBrute are predominantly modern concrete buildings that have been plastered and painted to disguise their raw material. In showing its concrete construction in the rough, without embellishment or adornment, the house feels grounded and true. You get the sense it will age beautifully, embracing the passage of time without the need to maintain any pretence of smooth, superficial perfection.

The heavily textured walls also stand in sharp contrast to the glossy finishes that typify Bangkok’s commercial environments where the siblings spend a large portion of their working lives. Both the architects and the inhabitants describe the effect as cosy, rather than cold, and after a long day spent in malls and shiny office blocks, the soothing solidity of unfinished concrete offers a calming respite.



DROP BOX

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FINISHES
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