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LET IT BE NATURE'S WAY FOR BIRDS

A new shelter for birds in Chiang Mai, Thailand is helping to stimulate the eco system, writes Aneeta Sundararaj

WHEN a crime is committed, evidence is collected from the crime scene. This evidence is catalogued and kept in a secure place. Months or even years later, when the parties to the proceedings are ready, this evidence is presented in court. What happens, though, when such evidence is a live animal?

This was the dilemma that Jariyawadee Lekawatana (also known as Jari) had to contend with a few years ago. The petite architect explained that each year, thousands of birds are smuggled in and out of Thailand and sold on the world's growing black market for such animals. Rescued birds usually die in confinement because they are kept in cages for up to five years as evidence while waiting for the smugglers to be prosecuted.

To address this problem, Jari embarked on a project that would eventually be called The Bird Sanctuary. It resulted in her being declared the Asia Pacific Gold winner in the LafargeHolcim Foundation 4th cycle (2014 - 2015).

The Foundation recently launched its 5th International LafargeHolcim Awards which offers US\$2 million (RM8.9 million) in total cash prizes. It is seeking entries from architects, urban design planners and engineers and the closing date is in March 2017.

PROVIDING PROTECTION

The inspiration for the Chiang Mai Bird Sanctuary came sometime in 2007, says Jari. And it all began with a man called Chak Cherdatsirikul. He visited Brazil, in particular, a place called Buraco das Araras. Loosely translated, it means "sinkhole of the macaws". It was abandoned and vandalised. "It became a garbage dump," she says.

Also, because of growing deforestation, the macaws began to disappear, until none were left. Then, the owner of the place, Modesto Sampo, cleaned up the place and released a pair of red and green macaws. In time, these birds multiplied and the area was once again full of macaws. Today, it

is a renowned bird sanctuary and tourist attraction.

Duly inspired by this story, Chak wanted to do the same thing with a piece of land that belonged to his family. It was situated in the Sun Pa Tong province and it had been left undeveloped since 1997. Originally, his plan was to create a modest place and a bird sanctuary which he would call Protective Wing.

When he and Jari heard about the sorry state of the birds held in captivity while waiting to provide evidence in court, the idea of this bird sanctuary became rooted and more ambitious.

She also discussed the matter with a local bird specialist she calls Dr Ben,



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Jariyawadee Lekawatana



and discovered some horrifying truths. "Sometimes, these birds that were caught were given dog food," she says. "They were kept in cages all the time." After some five years in such atrocious conditions, many of these birds were doomed to perish.

SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

Determined to create a nice habitat for the birds, which included a hospital for them, Jari and her team at Architect Kidd set about designing something new.

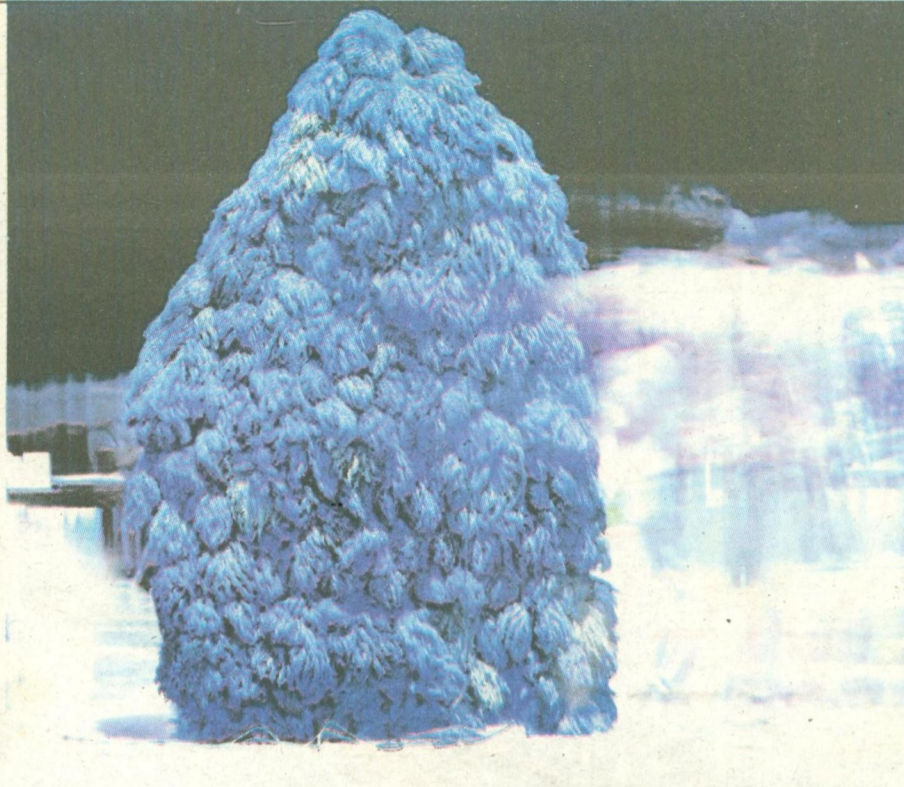
"As architects, [we have] limited knowledge but are willing to learn," says Jari. The idea was to go beyond creating

a natural landscape for birds. Describing the project as a collaboration between professionals, the others she worked with included scientists, botanists, bird specialists and bird watchers.

In the master plan submitted for the competition, this project is described in the following terms: "The project is located on a 12 hectare plot in the middle of a rice field in Chiang Mai. The area is divided into grassland, farmland, forest and bush land, wetlands and pond zones.

This is the natural part of the project. The idea was to create several landscape types as habitats for different kinds of birds."

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Clockwise from left:
 Birdwatching tower; Bird hut;
 Protective wing of bird sanctuary.



There is also a hotel for the growing crowd of eco-tourists. There are also plans to convert remaining tobacco barns into permanent aviaries. They will house birds confiscated by the smugglers. Other than being rehabilitated, they can be studied up close. The birds that can no longer be returned to the wild will live there for the rest of their lives.

One curious building Jari's designed and is creating is the birdwatching tower called A Bird Hut. As testament to a sustainable project, these towers are made using waste products from palm fibre. They act as a habitat and food source for all birds in the area. Also, as stated on the

competition's website: "... more than 5 million tons of palm [fibre] is discarded annually in Thailand. Its high insulation capacity, compatibility with nature, and moisture-retention property make palm [fibre] ideal for energy-efficiency and eco-friendly architecture."

COCONUT OR BANANA?

There is a personal motivation for Jari and a reason why she pursues such sustainable projects.

Thailand, she says, is known as "a land of smiles" because there are no earthquakes, no hurricanes or volcanoes; hence the people are always happy and

smiling. "We took it all for granted," she counters, referring to the devastating 2011 floods in the country. While many people couldn't have imagined such a calamity befalling them, she wasn't surprised as studies show that there's little forest left in Thailand.

"Water used to be our friend," she adds. "But now, the way we've built our cities, water cannot flow."

Worse, she says as she shakes her head, our kids have little connection with nature. Incredulous, she adds: "There's one person in my office; she cannot tell the difference between a coconut tree and a banana tree."

Fuelled by this need to combine

architecture with conservation, education, research and eco tourism, Jari is very proud of the progress of the project thus far. Her eyes sparkle when she says that since the sanctuary was set up, she's seen a lot of changes.

Children who once wanted to keep their birds in cages no longer have that desire after learning about them. Observing the nature of the birds themselves has allowed Jari to study the natural order of things. In essence, the lessons Jari's learnt is simple: Sometimes, the best way to understand and appreciate nature is to let animals live in nature — and not keep them all caged up.