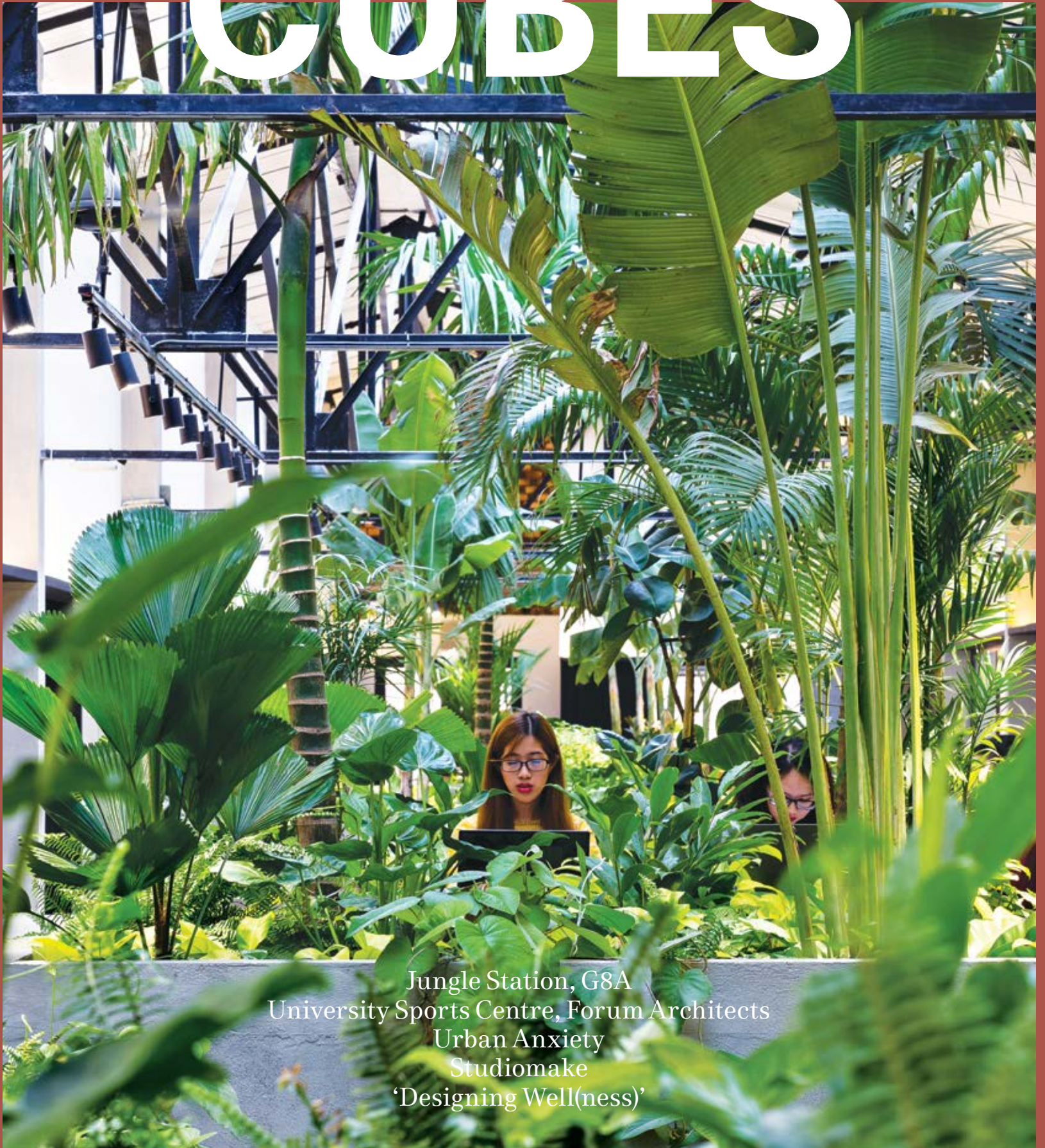


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Jungle Station, G8A
University Sports Centre, Forum Architects
Urban Anxiety
Studiomake
'Designing Well(ness)'

Making And Meaning

Words Paphop Kerdsup Portrait Photography Adit Sombunsa
Project Photography Various

For Thailand's Studiomake, there is no distinct boundary between the acts of design and construction. They are a singularity – a point evidenced by the presence of a workshop in the studio space. David Schafer, Director of the INDE Awards-winning studio, sits down with his former intern to discuss how his approach continues to develop.

“That studio, the one that has their own workshop.” This phrase pops into everyone’s minds when the name Studiomake is mentioned. I was introduced to David and Im Schafer, the two founders of Studiomake, at their operating ground in Sai Ma (a district on the outskirts of Bangkok, Thailand) four years ago. It’s a strange but interesting feeling for someone who previously spent three months as an intern in the studio to be sitting down and talking with one of the founders again, but in a different role. The conversation between David and I takes place in the library above the studio overlooking the workshop.

“Well, I think I bought the domain name in 2006. It was before Im and I went to graduate school together.” David speaks lightheartedly as he recalls the time when everything began. “But we really started off when we moved to Thailand in 2009. We realised that there would be a lot of opportunities here,” he says. After receiving degrees in architecture from the University of Arizona and working in the States, the two decided that they were ready to start their own practice together. David talks about how the idea of studying for master’s degrees came across their minds while they were finding their own professional identity and approach. But with both of them already licensed architects in the US at the time, further exploration of craft and making became the alternative they were both interested in. The two finally went on to pursue their post-graduate education at Cranbrook Academy of Art. David graduated in metalsmithing and Im in ceramics.

“For [Studiomake], there is no distinction between the design process and the making process. It’s a gradient and part of the same spectrum. We see ourselves not as a fixed part of that spectrum but moving back and forth,” he explains, shedding light on why Studiomake’s projects have always been an overlap between designing and constructing. David tells me that one of the studio’s first projects, Baan Sai Ma (which is the studio and his current home), is a point of origin for many work processes. It was an opportunity to experiment with materials and construction methods as well as the management aspect of the project within the Thai context. Particularly, it was a chance to actually work with *chang* (fabricators) who have since taken significant roles in the production

of all Studiomake’s works and are now important members of the studio.

Of all Studiomake’s projects, Guan Yin Pavilion pushes the design and making process furthest. The 1,500-square-metre pavilion is the headquarters for the Chinese-Thai Institute at Rangsit University. The floating exhibition hall rises and falls with the changing water level. The design plays with the physical nature of materials such as ceramic tiles and exposed concrete, with traces of the casting mould intentionally made evident. Brick is rendered in diverse expressions, serving as a pivotal element that adds an interesting dimension to the built structure.

While the completion of Guan Yin Pavilion in 2015 was a peak for Studiomake, there has been a significant shift in the way the studio views architecture in the past couple of years – especially after the passing of Im in 2016. Says David, “It’s interesting you asked me about those projects that are very important in our portfolio, but I’m not as excited to talk about them anymore. Right now, I would say our practice has a more domestic focus.”

The return to forms that are ‘closer’ to human daily life is something we can expect to see from Studiomake’s future projects. Apart from the making of homes that are adaptable to changing family groups (a different elemental characteristic from most Western homes), Studiomake is also interested in other spaces where people spend significant amounts of time – offices and playgrounds for example. Nevertheless, one thing that remains constant and will be further developed is the studio’s approach in which ‘design’ and ‘making’ overlap, with a focus firmly on fabrication.

Says David, “The benefit of being a maker is that we gain a deeper understanding of the material and then, in turn, can be a better designer. I always emphasise this to my staff and students – that technical knowledge is not a boring thing but makes you more a creative designer. The more we know about a material, the more we know it can be. The more we understand a tool, the more we can ask it to do.”

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Opposite: David Schafer (centre) and the Studiomake team with a new installation project for Central World. For this project, Studiomake collaborated with Klein Dytham Architecture, who designed the installation; Studiomake is the fabricator. Pages 60-61: The Guan Yin Pavilion – a view along the front brick ‘screen wall’ facade and the glass enclosure of the exhibition hall. The project was undertaken with collaborating structural engineer Borvornbhun Vonganan. Photo by Spaceshift Studio (courtesy of Studiomake).

Material Translation

Guan Yin Pavilion (2015) sits at the centre of a lake at Rangsit University in Thailand's Pathum Thani province and accommodates the Chinese-Thai Institute. The custom-extruded, double-fired grey bricks were developed by Studiomake in collaboration with a brick factory in Ang Thong. A double-firing process transformed red Thai clay to a shade of grey – a reference to the dominant brick colour in China. Aside from the 'floating' exhibition hall, the building contains offices, seminar rooms, an outdoor courtyard and a small cafe.

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“The more we know about a material, the more we know it can be. The more we understand a tool, the more we can ask it to do.”

David Schafer



Opposite: A view of the Studiomake office and workshop. David's home sits on the upper floor above the studio, as does the library, which overlooks the double-volume workshop. Photo by Wison Tungthunya (courtesy of Studiomake). Above: David Schafer in his library. The INDE.Awards 2018 jury described Studiomake as: "A remarkable and ingenious model for the Southeast Asian design studio."