

Clay to Kiln: The Craft Of Mang Thit

Full Design Narrative

Mang Thit is a quaint village situated in the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam, where the land is shaped by a network of rivers and canals that defines the region's unique landscape. The village lies within an area prone to seasonal flooding, with the water levels rising during the wet season, often transforming the surrounding fields into vast waterways. This natural rhythm of the land has deeply influenced the way of life in Mang Thit, where agriculture and traditional crafts, such as brickmaking, have flourished over the centuries. The village is especially known for its centuries-old brickmaking tradition. For generations, artisans in Mang Thit have crafted bricks by hand using local clay. Mang Thit is rich in alluvial soil deposited by the Mekong River providing a supply of high-quality clay ideal for brickmaking. The molded clay is then fired in traditional brick kilns that have covered the countryside for decades. At its peak, the village was home to 2,000 active kilns, which produced bricks that were vital for construction throughout the region. These kilns not only provided livelihoods for many families but also became an integral part of the village's cultural identity.

However, in recent years, the brickmaking industry has significantly declined. The primary reason for this shift is the growing environmental concern over the pollution caused by the kilns. The traditional brickmaking process released large amounts of smoke and particulate matter into the air, contributing to local pollution and public health issues. Due to the pollution problem, the government has shut down the kilns. With increasing awareness of these environmental impacts, combined with the rise of more sustainable and factory-produced bricks, the demand for handmade bricks from Mang Thit dwindled. As a result, most of the kilns are no longer in production. Today, only a few kilns remain standing, some of which are abandoned and

slowly being overtaken by nature. Despite the decline of the industry, the brick kilns of Mang Thit still stand as silent witnesses to the village's rich heritage. They serve as powerful symbols of the relationship between human craftsmanship, the land, and the environmental challenges that the village faces.

This studio's focus revolves around the question, "How can we address the pollution and flooding challenges in Mang Thit while safeguarding the village's architectural integrity and preserving its kiln structures from further deterioration? Our first task as a studio was to analyze the site, Mang Thit, and research the cultural and environmental properties that contribute to the craft village.

Following, in groups of two, we were assigned individual smaller-scale sites within Mang Thit to develop a program for.

My studio partner and I developed a heritage center focusing on materiality, structure, and environmental and cultural factors. The heritage center, Clay to Kiln: The Craft of Mang Thit, is a primary gateway and introduction to the historic craft village of Mang Thit. It provides information on the historical and cultural context of the region and an immersive exhibition showcasing the materiality, process of brickmaking, and culture of Mang Thit.

The center is driven by the cyclical nature of the brickmaking process. The spatial sequencing traces geometry of implied forms derived by the seven surrounding kilns placed sporadically into the site. The pathway is then formed to flow around these implied geometries. The flow of the pathway echoes the flow of the Mekong Delta River and the circular process from clay to brick. The design approach for the heritage center is rooted from a sensitivity to the environment. Instead of disrupting the natural rhythms of the landscape reclaiming what was

altered by man. Lastly, a copper color painted galvanized steel is used for the perforated pathway and structural supports for the path.

By embracing the rhythms of the river, the memory of the kilns, and the legacy of the region and local materials, the center not only preserves the spirit of Mang Thit's past but also reimagines its future, one that honors transformation, coexistence, and the quiet power of place. the river, the pathway is elevated to accommodate the flow of the tides, immersing the visitors to a continuous dialogue. This strategy preserves the ecological integrity of the site and integrates the flow of the tides into the spatial experience, making the river a vital part of the design.

The center's design embodies the spirit of coexistence not only exploring the flow of the tides, but also exploring the idea of allowing nature to continue to encapsulate the kilns and surrounding areas. This encourages remembrance and invites reflection on the relationship between human creation and the natural world both in terms of time and impact. The idea of nature's embrace represents the inevitable passage of time, spiritually in terms of rebirth and the life cycle, and architecturally in terms of resilience of the materials.

When recreating the warehouse's structure surrounding the kilns, we wanted to honor ideas of flow and sculpture in the brickmaking process. The center's design takes cues from the organic form of the kilns. The existing warehouse's roofs were reimagined with undulating, organic forms softening their original geometry to echo the curvature and language of the kilns.

The design is rooted in the material history of the region. The exhibition displays are constructed using gabions filled with rice husk bricks, reflecting the practice of using rice husks to fuel the kilns in the traditional brickmaking process. We wanted to transform and recycle rice husks as an energy source into an actual solid structure. The primary warehouse structure is constructed using recycled bricks sourced from original kilns that were destroyed. Steel is native

to Vietnam and is used to form the gabion structures supporting the rice husk displays. Steel also serves as a structural and a lighting element within the roof. Copper is also a material native to Vietnam and forms the undulating roof structure. Copper will patina over time reflecting the cycle of the landscape reclaiming what was altered by man. Lastly, a copper color painted galvanized steel is used for the perforated pathway and structural supports for the path.

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