The Gong

atelier oï x Smiling Gecko

The architecture of “The Gong”

The Gong is a circular building. It is made up of recording studios, an auditorium with 100 seats and a stage, a café, a reception area and offices.

The design of the building was modelled on the gong – a round, disc-like musical instrument commonly used during ceremonies and rituals in Cambodian culture. The architecture freezes the image of a sound pattern, i.e. the vibrations that spread out in concentric circles when the centre of the gong is struck.

At the highest point of the site, the terrain was filled in with excavated material, raising it by two metres. The material comes from a nearby rainwater retention basin, which is also circular and has a connection to The Gong: it will be used as a reservoir for agricultural purposes on the campus.

The building is visibly elevated, as though on a platform, which protects it from flooding during the rainy season. The round shape accommodates the wind, letting it glide along the façade without putting up any resistance. It minimises the area exposed to sunlight on the eastern and western sides.

Spot footings made of steel and concrete piles pierce deep down into the ground. The outer shell, relieved from its load-bearing function, surrounds the circular platform over which the roof seems to float, supported on 36 columns and a complex steel truss spanning 14 metres. The building was designed as a protective roof under which the studios are positioned in individual rooms. The free-standing brick walls, finished off with a concrete frieze, define the rest of the space and its functions. The same height as the façade, they form an upper line and accentuate the transition into the open steel truss.

A continuous floor made of polished, light-grey concrete reinforces the idea of walking through the building. All columns and the steel truss are painted in red, which brings them into a visual dialogue with the red roof tiles and bricks. The combination of rough and smooth, cool and warm, shiny and matte surfaces ensures exceptional tactile and visual quality, even though the materials used – concrete, steel and bricks – are simple, everyday building materials.

Right in the centre of the building, under the round roof opening, is the impluvium, the 1.75-metre deep recess in the floor. From the bottom, the circular structure rises like an amphitheatre with two levels up to the ground floor – and these two levels can be used as benches around the impluvium.

This same concept is echoed in the auditorium on the eastern side of the building: the 100 seats are spread out over the multi-level concrete structure along the exterior façade. This play of levels expands the space upwards and downwards from the base plate.

The recording studios are a distinctive feature of the building. They appear to be one uniform volume, but each recording studio is an isolated unit that corresponds to specific acoustic requirements. Each studio is built with reinforced concrete, and the units are not connected with one another to prevent sound transmission and ensure the best possible recording quality.

Inside the live and semi-live rooms and vocal booths, the concrete shells are clad with acoustic panels. The panels, made of rubber wood and construction wood, have vertical slat structures that were developed specifically for the site. They imitate the characteristics of wooden instruments: bodies that absorb, reproduce or sublimate sounds. The two control rooms, the video room and the sound lock have lower ceilings. There are elongated openings that playfully run across their walls, making an aesthetic reference to the brick walls.

The studios and storage areas are air-conditioned in order to protect the instruments and technical systems from humidity.

In addition to the impluvium, another notable feature of The Gong – in terms of both form and function – is the outer shell. It stands out for its perforated brick wall that uses an unusual masonry technique in which bricks are placed at a 90-degree angle to one another facing both inwards and outwards, which creates small openings that promote the natural ventilation and passive temperature regulation of the building. Visually, the interplay of openings and protruding bricks creates a sculptural surface. Atmospherically, it serves as a reminder of the world outside: the sounds and weather events become part of the building’s acoustic backdrop.

Air – water – light: the openings between the roof and outer shell produce Venturi effects. The building’s water management is organised around the impluvium. The rainwater collected there is diverted to the nearby reservoir. Sunlight shines above the opening in the roof and through the outer shell into the interior. The architecture plays with the idea of sculpting nature and turning it into a sensual element of the building.

Indoor-outdoor references shape the building at various levels. To stay with the image of the gong: as with concentric circles, the building expands starting from its centre, the impluvium, moving out to the circular benches, then to the columns, outer shell and exterior. Here, a freshly planted bamboo forest surrounds the building, forming yet another concentric circle in the “sound waves”. As fast-growing trees, the bamboo forest will also help to regulate the building’s temperature in the future as a green envelope.

The image of the gong – the musical instrument that inspired the design of this building and gave it its name – can be best seen from the bird’s eye perspective. The building honours architecture, education and culture. But also the concept of hope – that this new place can become a new meeting place for modern culture in Cambodia.

The project in figures

Planning: 2021 – 2023

Construction period: 2023 – 2024

Dimensions: 40 metres in diameter; 9.6 metres in height

Room allocation plan: 4 studios (Live room, Semi-live, vocal booths), 2 control rooms, a video recording booth, equipment rooms, auditorium with 100 seats and a stage, café and service areas

Materials of structure: Concrete, steel structure, bricks, clay roofing tiles

Materials of studios: Rubber wood and construction wood

Architecture: atelier oï (Planning and creative direction)

Acoustics: Applied Acoustics

Sound engineering

experts: Department of Noise

Catering: Gastro-Online AG

Technical planners and

company: RKC Engineering and Construction, Cambodia

Link to images and visualisations of the project :

<https://www.atelier-oi.ch/en/work/smiling-gecko-the-gong>

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About atelier oï

Atelier oï is a community of creators that is made up of the three founding partners, Aurel Aebi, Armand Louis and Patrick Reymond, as well as a transdisciplinary team of 45 employees in the areas of architecture, interior design, scenography and other related disciplines. They think and work as a collective and are known for their innovative way of designing products, spaces and atmospheres.

atelier oï works for a large number of national and international companies, museums, health organisations and development projects such as Smiling Gecko. They have received many international awards for their work.

[www.atelier-oi.ch](http://www.atelier-oi.ch)

About Smiling Gecko

The Smiling Gecko charity is a non-profit association recognised by Swiss law with its headquarters in Dübendorf, Switzerland, and was founded by Swiss artist and photographer Hannes Schmid. Since 2014, Smiling Gecko has been working as a local aid organisation to develop a functioning rural community for work, education and agriculture. The aim is to counter poverty and a lack of prospects with a socially sustainable concept.

Children receive a bilingual school education in line with international standards; young adults get vocational training. The centre has its own craft and production facilities, agriculture and livestock farming, a hotel resort for paying guests, and performs humanitarian aid activities.

The Gong and Sonic Studios are part of the Smiling Gecko Educational Campus. The recording studios will be available for hire starting in autumn 2024. Income from The Gong and Sonic Studios will be reinvested in Smiling Gecko’s projects.

[www.smilinggecko.ch](http://www.smilinggecko.ch)

[www.gong-cambodia.com](http://www.gong-cambodia.com)

[www.recordingcambodia.com](http://www.recordingcambodia.com)