

REAL ESTATE

magazine

THAILAND



Star Architect
Mario Kleff

For my friend Waen

REALESTATE

magazine
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Since 2001 – Thailand's first
English language property magazine

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Thailand 2010

A little confidence goes a long way

The word "confidence" crops up a lot when moving in business circles, especially in the property market.

People talk about recent events in Bangkok damaging confidence. No arguments here. But just about everyone I speak to is in agreement – if confidence can be restored, the future for the property market in Pattaya is bright. Wouldn't it be nice were the "if" to become a reality?

Slowly but surely I feel confidence is returning. Can I back that statement up? Well, I'll give it a try.

First, the currency here in Thailand is stable. Or at least it was at the time of writing. Admittedly a lot can change overnight. But a stable currency is a positive. Try talking to the Brits about their pound or other Europeans about the Euro and how wise a decision it was to allow Greece to adopt the Euro.

Second, the "giants" – tower block condominiums – are no longer deep in sleep. Projects such as Reflection at the southern end of Jomtien Beach are now underway. Heights Holdings' W Tower is also being actively marketed after being mothballed for a while. And we even hear that investment cash has been found to get another landmark hi-rise project going again. We cannot say more on this until we receive confirmation that our information is correct. But we hope to have news in time for our next issue.

Third, Heights Holdings have reported their best April since they arrived in the city. They are saying "low season, what low season?"

Could all this be possible if confidence is not returning?

One man who certainly doesn't lack confidence is architect Mario Kleff. Chat to him for just a short time and you will soon work out why.

In recent times Mario has been a big supporter of the magazine. We thank him for that. This month he is the subject of a 12-page special for two key reasons – we have a great set of photographs taken of him by Frank Keller (more about Frank on Page 24) but also Mario has announced that he is joining the ranks of the developers. This news will make other developers sit up and take note.

Mario is a man who gains a mixed reaction from our readership. Some feel he is an egotist (Mario, himself, admits as much); others are keen to see what he is up to next. This month's article may serve to antagonise the former group but it will certainly appeal to the latter.

For myself I feel Mario's view on how things ought to be done is a breath of fresh air. Summed up simply, he feels that *all* the money for marketing and building should be in place before a project is undertaken.

How does that compare to the "let's get it started, but if the deposits don't flow in we'll call a halt" way of working?

I kicked off talking about confidence. Which approach would make investors and homemakers more confident? There is little doubt in my mind.

Mario thinks other developers will follow his example. It will be interesting to watch how events unfold.

Dave Buckley

Mario Kleff: International star architect



建築

zen design and construction

庭の設計

Mario Kleff, a 41-year-old iconic designer and architect, is the creative genius driving Wandegroup, the Pattaya-based architecture, engineering and construction firm to more and more success. Now he is preparing the next step to become a developer of condominium and hotel projects.

Mario Kleff: A different developer



Today a new development in Pattaya usually takes about three years – one year of marketing and two of construction and building – and sometimes another year is added due to delays. Mario says he will launch, build and open his own first condo development in 12 months.

Over the past five years the Pattaya-based WandeeGroup has been producing designs for high rise buildings, condominiums and internationally and for the local market. With his signature modern, reductionist design Mario Kleff has positioned himself as a recognizable brand name for architecture and now plans to take this one step further...

Between Wong Amat and Bang Sarae the label “Designed by Star Architect Mario Kleff” has become ubiquitous and is present on many prominent projects of leading developers in Pattaya.

Now, Mario Kleff is announcing that he will once again extend his business scope and will become a developer in his own right – with a few condominium projects, a hotel and a number of private homes to be launched in the near future.

Asked about where these projects will be built, Mario gives no answer but says it will be only a couple of weeks until the projects are officially launched and presented to the market and that he will start construction at the same time.

Everything will be different

Learning from the experience of the many complete project designs, engineering and construction of other peoples developments, Mario says, he sets out to change the game once and for all.

“Now, developers take about a year from the launch of a project to the start of construction with an average building period of about two years. This is due to cashflow reasons – the sales of the project and the financing of the actual project go ‘hand in hand’ – and in case a project doesn’t sell as quickly as expected, the construction is delayed to match the cashflow from investors,” said Mario.

“The first thing I changed is the business model. I made sure I have all the funding available from day one – and I mean *all* the funding to design, market and build the entire project.

“And due to the use of proven construction elements like cellular carbon steel beams and large span concrete flooring, this means I can build the project

Story: ULI KAISER

Pictures: FRANK KELLER

in the shortest possible time, which actually reduces the overall cost as well.”

The customer benefits from speed and quality

Motivation for Mario Kleff to enter the league of developers was his daily experience of huge discrepancy between promise and delivery in the market. “Even market leaders and well know developers try to cut corners at every possible end,” he said.

According to Mario, the projects all start out with a great design and engineering and nice showrooms. Later the owners complain about cheap fittings and that their air conditioning units are not working...

He continues to point out, that if the finance is not completely secured from day one there are just too many changes during the three years of construction because the developers look at every possibility to save money.

Due to this concept, developers in

Pattaya have to manage cashflow between multiple projects – and so, if one project doesn’t work out as expected, it can affect all the other projects as well. Delays and compromises spread through the development like a virus – and the buyers who trusted the well respected name ends up with much less than he originally expected.

WandeeGroup will set an examples and others will follow soon

Mario says: “I will just prove that the property development business can be done differently – with many benefits for everyone involved. Even the investors are satisfied because the projects are better managed and delivered even higher returns more quickly.”

The energetic architect believes that his example will show that projects can be done in a much better way and will ultimately benefit even the other developers, who will follow a successful example.

Not very many people want to be the leader and do something different. But everyone likes proven success formulas and that’s what Mario Kleff wants to bring to the market starting in the next few weeks. Ω



By reducing the time to market by 50 per cent I will set new standards in speed, quality and value for money, says Mario.

Mario Kleff: Pattaya's leading architect

'Design is the combination of
intelligence and aesthetics'





Mario Kleff: Redefining speed to market

2002

- Built his first house after traditional Thai-way in outer circles of Bangkok; only bamboo and palm leaves were used.
- Lived and worked in this house over a period of two years eating the food provided by the surrounding fields.
- No water, electricity or other amenities were in place. Water canals were his bathroom.

2004

- Set up his company MIN design in Pattaya: Architectural and engineering services.
- Received official work permits as architect, engineer and landscape designer.
- Designed 12 extreme engineered villas and large landscapes.
- Met his future wife Thai-Chinese Nittaya Wongsin who was running a real estate firm.

2005

- Married into Nittaya Wongsin's local Chinese business family.
- Set up his Wandeegroup with full architect and engineering services including construction and real estate business.
- Built the first villas and houses, and his company building Pattaya (TH), Thapraya Road.

2006

- Designed several villas and resorts across Thailand and build further villas in Chonburi (TH) province.
- Participated in national Thai architects competition and provides an iconic design for a museum for His Majesty Bhumibol Adulyadej, King of Thailand.

2007

- Set up new business module for presentation services such as 3D design studio and model construction.
- Imported custom-designed super computers to build a render-farm as along with other equipment.
- Set records for project design and execution and produced most advanced 3D designs.
- Produced solution and master planning for complete condo projects with total value over Bt1bn.

2008

- Introduction of cellular steel beam columns to Thailand.
- Official permit for largest floor span construction of 42 metres on multiple story residential building.
- Pattaya record for most construction permits received.
- Designed over 45 condominium blocks and more than 25 villas across Thailand within only a little over one year and into 2009.

2009

- Master architect/ structural designer on 38-storey W-Tower, Pattaya (TH) Wong Amat.
- Master architect/ structural designer on further four international high-rise buildings to be built in Dubai (UAE), New York (USA), Moscow (Russia) and Jomtien (TH).
- Mario Kleff received Thai Citizenship and at the same time earned the title "International Star Architect".

2010

- Iconic Architectural Designs and Landmarks for the Thai Government.
- Multiple construction sites for condominium blocks and villas in Pattaya area from Bang Saray (TH) to Wong Amat (TH). Total of project value: several Billion Baht.
- His Wandeegroup runs now with manpower of over 350.
- Start as a developer for hotel and residential buildings.

Extremes in Motion

Introduction to the world of internationally acclaimed star architect Mario Kleff ...

Everybody knows stories where ordinary people turn from dishwasher to millionaire and sometimes back again or twice over – but this analogy doesn't work with Mario Kleff. His story is different and much more extreme.

When Mario came to Thailand in 2002, he was not looking for a new start like many other people that are coming to the Kingdom. Back in Germany he had gone through an education in art, design and engineering and a career in marketing and branding for Germany's global brands BMW and SIEMENS.

Shortly after 9/11 2001 he stopped all activities in Germany and flew to Thailand to take a two-year sabbatical. He lived in a hut built with his own hands from bamboo and palm leaves at one of the many Klongs, the water canals running through Bangkok.

Mario Kleff has performed extreme feats before, like copying the "uncopyable" Book of Kells over a seven-year period when he was just 22 years old, but this time it was different. While he was recreating the Book of Kells, he lived like a monk in a monastery, now he lived like Siddharta at the river, sleeping in the open with the only protection being the palm leaves and befriending local farmers who did not understand how a foreigner would ever live in this way.

He earned a most basic living by selling coconut drinks on the street and gradually upgraded his life step by step back to our modern society.

But Mario seems to always have to do the undoable – in whatever situation he is in. Having gone through a stellar career from coconut peddler to international star architect with clients in Dubai, Moscow and New York, he now works on a motorcycle with a off hand-made 4 litre engine and over 400 horsepower and at the same time builds dragster cars with up to 15 litre custom-build engines and up to 2,000 horsepower for street use.

However when you meet Mario, you encounter a pleasant but uncompromising personality. In the

first five minutes of the meeting he will tell you that yes, he is arrogant, but that he can afford to be so and that he doesn't need to compromise.

"I do what I want and I don't do what I don't," is the main motive and can be applied to almost every part of his life. It seems he left all fears in the bamboo hut and acts now in whichever way he sees fit feeling no need to adhere to the social behaviour usually expected from someone in his position.

For example, when an affluent Middle East client flew in from Dubai to commission a high rise design he tried to negotiate a price for Mario's services; next thing, the rich Arab found himself out on the street. Mario certainly has a lot of time for his clients and listens very carefully to their needs – but he will not compromise the outcome.

He wears his long hair in a plait, Jeans and an open shirt. His private life is just like is work intensive and highly integrated – his Thai-Chinese wife Nittaya and their daughter Ming Ming live and work together in the modern office of Wandeegroup at the slope of Pratumnak Hill, South Pattaya.

He now guards his office with ultra-high performance digital surveillance cameras that are usually used in attack helicopters or fighter planes. He might need it – not everybody likes the highly competitive architect who, in addition to his international projects, seems to be taking over the local Pattaya's property market from the inside out.

His renderings are done on a networked cluster of super-PCs he designed that makes both the engineering calculation and also provide the high resolution renderings used in presentation materials to his clients.

He cruises around Pattaya on his custom-build Harley Davidson and is in the process of building the fastest street car on the planet. Now, Mario starts fresh as a developer and wants to set new standards in speed and quality for the residential and commercial market.

It can't be done? Yes that's what you might, think, but chances are Mario will prove you wrong. Ω



Wandeegroup founder and lead architect Mario Kleff talks about the challenges of becoming a developer, why his approach is different and why this is the next logical step for him and his company.

Uli Kaiser: Mario, why did you decide to go into development, you are already very busy with your current projects that you are designing and building for other companies.

Mario Kleff: First of all, Wandeegroup is not changing and will continue to provide the same range of architectural, engineering and construction services to their clients. The development of our own projects just adds another dimension to the business range.

UK: When the top Wandeegroup architect turns into a developer, how will your clients react?

MK: I am sure that the clients of Wandeegroup will watch our new projects very closely and will in the end share the benefits of the new portfolio.

UK: What are the projects and when and where will you launch them?

MK: We are launching a few condominium projects, a hotel and some houses, all within the next couple of months. I don't want to talk about the location now, this will be announced as a part of the launch programme.

UK: So what is the difference between your projects and the others?

MK: It all starts with the investors. I have a large number of people who like my work and want to invest in my projects. So I told them that they have to put up all the money at the start of the project. This will allow me to start building at the same time the projects are launched into the market. The project will then be finished completely in only 12 months which will set a new standard for this industry.

The second aspect is that the buyers will get exactly what they expect. There will be no compromises in the quality of the building and the interior design. In fact I like to spend more money to get the best quality interior that I can find within the available budget so that the customers get superior value for their investment.

UK: Are you not afraid to build more condos in a market that's already very competitive?

MK: Our projects will be very different from the others – from the design point, the

Exclusive interview with Mario Kleff by Uli Kaiser

Everyone will watch very closely what we are doing

construction, the speed to market and the quality, but still be affordable and at the right price point.

Again, I have absolutely no interest to compete with the other developers here in Pattaya. The opposite is true: I want to show them how it can be done better, so that at the end they are getting the benefits and are more successful with all of their projects in the future.

UK: Will you work with real estate agents or will you try to go directly to the clients?

MK: We will, of course, work with the local real estate agents, they play an important part in this industry which we respect.

But they also have to work to the same high standards as we do. Our property developments are premium products and will have to be marketed in the same way.

UK: If these developments are successful, what are the next steps, what else do you see in your future?

MK: In the medium- and long-term I want to become involved in the actual city planning and development. I have already been commissioned for a number of future projects for the city of Pattaya and the Chonburi region, but these projects will take a number of years before they will be realised. Pattaya will eventually step beyond being solely a

tourism destination and will become a full fledged city with a business community.

This will require different types of building like office towers, exhibition centres, more shopping centres and other kinds of infrastructure. I am already quite some time in discussion with the local government as well as departments in Bangkok. Pattaya has a great future and I will support its development in every aspect.

I have explained more about this in the new international version of **Real Estate magazine** which will be launched at the soon after this magazine goes to print. So get online and get yourself a copy to find out more about Pattaya 2015. Ω





Mario Kleff: Join me there is more to come!