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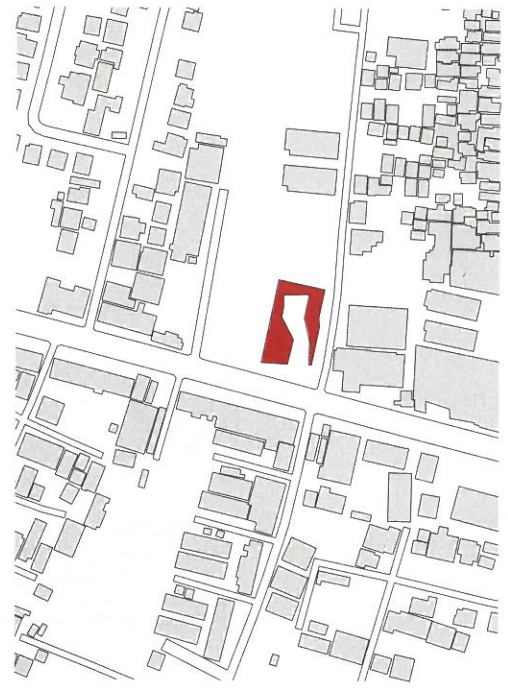
# Dadfa market

M Space's Bangkok community mall carefully negotiates the critiques that have been levelled against the new retail typology, writes *Pirasri Povatong*





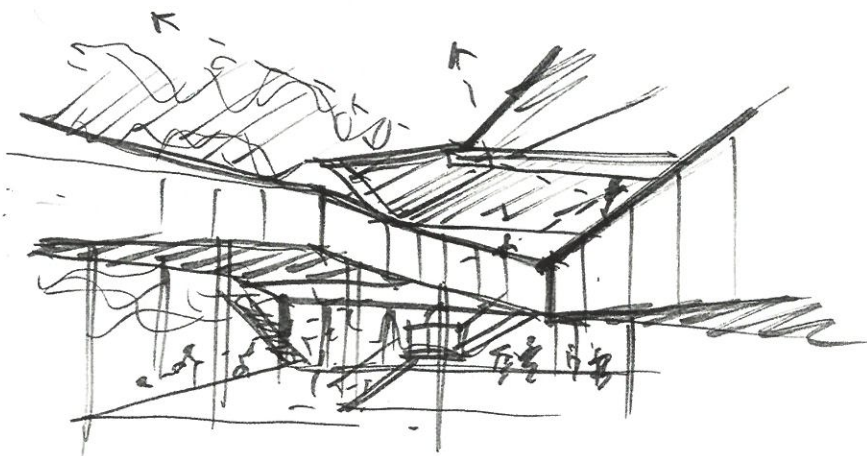
**Space's Dadfa market**  
in Bangkok's Bang Na  
neighbourhood  
(above) is an example  
of a 'community mall',  
a new retail type that  
has boomed in the Thai  
capital over the past  
decade. These  
medium-sized buildings  
aim to provide communal  
space for local residents  
(previous spread) as well  
as retail units





WISON TUNGTHUNYA

‘Dadfa blends into the jumbled surroundings of Bang Na with its unobtrusive form and hint of greenery inside’



**D**adfa (translating as ‘the deck’), is a community mall, one of thousands in the sprawling city of Bangkok. Located in the south-east of the city, it is surrounded by various building types: traditional Thai markets, shophouses, seven-storey apartment blocks, housing estates and, of course, other community malls, large and small. The latter is a fairly new form of retail that offers shopping, services and, ideally, some common public space, normally within the radius of a 10- to 20-minute drive. Unlike large shopping malls, community malls are medium-sized buildings that require relatively small plots of land and investment. A construction boom of such malls has taken place in Bangkok over the past ten years, with some schemes being well located, and exhibiting good tenant mix and design. But many community malls are gaudy, their spaces packed with shops, without offering any sense of ‘community’ or public space.

A walk through Dadfa reveals that it is not a typical Bangkok community mall. It blends into its jumbled surroundings, with its main facade of rusted metal panels and concrete vent blocks, its unobtrusive form and its hint of greenery inside. Dadfa occupies the southern half of an oblong site on La Salle Road, with a car park located around the back. Three tree-filled courtyards run through the length of the building, flanked by rows of commercial units that rise over two floors. A strip of service facilities runs along the western edge.

Functions are organised along a loop, which is a typical shopping mall plan – yet at Dadfa it feels different. More space than usual is devoted to circulation – horizontal as well as vertical – taking a variety of forms: corridors, gangways, ramps and stairs. These routes are woven through the central courtyards, which are filled with native trees and plants, linking the two rows of commercial units together in a rather complicated manner. The movement of people through the leafy space plays a leading role here; commercial activity seems secondary.

Dadfa is in Bang Na, in the urban periphery of Bangkok. A century ago, this area was all rice fields and fish farms. La Salle Road was a small lane branching off from Sukhumvit Road into the fields and farms; it was named after La Salle School, a private Catholic boys’ school established at the end of the road in 1963. Ten years later, the Bang Na-Trat Highway was constructed, linking Bangkok with Thailand’s eastern provinces, as well as the Suvarnabhumi Airport. Gradually, Bang Na was unevenly urbanised, especially the key arteries of Sukhumvit and Bang Na-Trat. But by the end of the 20th century, La Salle Road was still a relatively minor street, with small factories and suburban housing estates



Some community malls have been criticised for only offering upmarket retail aimed at wealthy consumers. Dadfa's retail tenants have included a spa and yoga studio (below), but the emphasis given to common green areas (opposite) and pet- and family-friendly events (bottom) suggests a commitment to keeping the mall open and public-facing



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WEERAPON SINGNOI

temporary market stalls, or for fairs.' The retail units on the first floor have slightly different levels, making the circulation loop an event in itself, with different vistas leading visitors around the building.

In terms of structure and form, Dadfa is a careful interpretation of the local architectural vocabulary. Its visual complexity belies a very simple and efficient structural system. The two floors are arranged around a basic orthogonal grid of reinforced concrete columns; the walkways on the first floor are separately designed steel structures, and the roof is yet another steel system, taking the form of three connected gable-roof sheds. In this way, Dadfa blurs the boundaries between interior and exterior space, offering ample well-shaded and well-ventilated areas.

A notable feature of the project is its controlled use of materials. Both client and architect were committed to using materials that age well – hence the use of wood, exposed concrete surfaces and rusted perforated steel panels. A nod to the local material palette is also found in the use of simple vent blocks and glass, as well as the rough blocks of concrete mixed with local soil used in some walls. All of this may seem too industrial to some, but it blends well with the no-nonsense feel of Bang Na. Dadfa is well built and easy to maintain. With such a clear design concept and planning of spaces, structure and form, it is a model that can be replicated in similar settings on Bangkok's extensive urban fringe.

Dadfa was completed in 2018 to considerable public acclaim as an alternative community mall. Its generous spaces serve a range of users, from local families to hipsters searching for Instagram-worthy shots. Recent years have seen Dadfa grow and evolve steadily under Boonthaweekit's guidance – she remains landlord and CEO of the development. As the trees have matured and the building has acquired the expected patina, the project is indeed an oasis of greenery and public gathering. Admittedly, the retail tenants remain quite upmarket, consisting of well-curated eateries and cafés on the ground floor and a rotating mix of businesses – a gym, yoga centre and spa – on the first floor, whose units are slightly harder to rent out (perhaps because there is only one lift at Dadfa, though plenty of stairs).

The project strives to be open to all through free activities such as art and craft fairs, farmers' markets and storytelling for children. During the pandemic, these public events were paused, but Dadfa is bringing them back. Today, the ground floor hums with activity during the day, with visitors peaking at lunchtime, after school and at the weekend. It is known as a barrier-free, pet-friendly and family-oriented space, which has allowed it to evolve within the fast-changing urban context of Bangkok.

The mall's popular programme of free events – including art and craft fairs, farmers' markets, gigs and children's storytelling – was temporarily paused during the pandemic, but has now been restarted

