

Urban Green Development Institute, Bangkok

The Urban Green Development Institute located in the Ding Daeng district of the city, opened its doors for the first time at the start of this month. Its aim: to help solve some of Bangkok's urban planning and environmental problems.

Ralph Gakenheimer, Professor of Urban Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), has been working with the Urban Green Development Institute to address some of these issues, building on research he did on Bangkok's city planning in the 1990s. Although he is quick to acknowledge Bangkok's faults, he remains generally positive about the state of the city.

"Compared to a lot of other Asian cities, Bangkok's infrastructure is pretty good. I've worked in both Colombo and Dakar, which are much worse. Even in



places like Shanghai, which is of course a substantial city and the economic motor of China, things are not as they should be," Gakenheimer explained. "Places that, at some level, appear to have more public resources than Bangkok are still in much worse shape."

But this is not to say that Bangkok is without its problems. "There are a whole variety of issues that need to be addressed," he went on. "It's impossible to pin-point just one key factor that needs to be addressed. There is a very serious water problem in the city and there needs to be better land use to minimise floods. Secondly, the number of cars and the population is rapidly increasing, which brings with it increased congestion problems."

In terms of a solution, Gakenheimer realises that there is no quick-fix answer. "With regards to how quickly these problems can be solved, I don't know at this stage. We're only just getting a picture of what to work on, and after that we have to decide what we can do to solve the problem. That is the purpose of this new institution. These are the kinds of things that the new university will be studying."

Initiated by Apirak Kosayodhin, the elected Governor of Bangkok, in conjunction with professors from both MIT and Harvard, the Urban Green Development Institute plans to expand to become part of a larger, forward-thinking university. As

the director of the facility, Bhubate Samutachak, explained, "the current institute is to become one of a number of faculties, each focusing on a different area of urban development - education, health, city planning, to name a few - so that all topics affecting urban environment are covered."

then sit exams. Instead, there will be an instructor, who is a professor, a co-instructor, who is a member of the Bangkok administration, and a series of advanced graduate students.

Together, they will work to solve a problem, for example, how to plan land use for reduced flood risk, and then the



However, the new university does not intend to follow a typical model of learning, taking a far more hands-on approach, aimed at improving the city whilst, in-turn, educating students. Professor Gakenheimer praised the model as something that European and American institutes could also benefit from. "You may be able to observe this as a model for what we can do back home. There are 163 courses offered at MIT on the subject of environment, but all of them are created independently. What we are trying to do in Bangkok is organise this into some kind of unified capability; that's what this institute's about."

Unlike traditional universities, it will not have a department for English, a department for mathematics, a department for biology and so on. Instead it will follow a practicum, a course of study that is problem rather than discipline based. Students will not have courses where they listen to lectures, read course material and

students, along with the faculty group, will work to solve that problem. In turn, this becomes the basis for solving the next problem. Gakenheimer explained that, "unlike a course, which is something you teach in the same way, year after year, a practicum works to solve a problem, and then the following practicum takes advantage of this research to work on the next problem."

The institute is still in its infancy, but the foundations are being laid for what could become a fantastic, innovative and beneficial resource for the city. "A lot of things have happened to Bangkok in recent years," Gakenheimer noted. "But right now it's up to the Governor to decide when we'll actually be able to start admitting students."

