

DESIGN FOR LIFE

Product design students are donating their finished furniture to those in need – and gaining vital experience

STORY AND PHOTOS: MELALIN MAHAVONGTRAKUL



Unloading the furniture.

Chuchart Kumkhiaw sells *som tam* and grilled chicken for a living in Pathum Thani. The stall, which sits in front of his house, was once in a rundown condition. Its squeaky wooden table where the cooking took place came with an uneven surface. There was also no dining table. Before, people had to sit on the available stone bench to watch black-and-white TV while they ate sticky rice.

Chuchart, 48, and his family of four only make 300 baht profit each day. However, the vendor hopes that the situation will soon change for the better with the arrival of new furniture from product design students at Assumption University.

This year, Assumption University's School of Architecture and Design has partnered with Habitat for Humanity to bring in a group of design students to make furniture for those who need it most — all in the hope of improving people's lives while giving the students a different learning experience. It's a much more sustainable alternative

to how the class products usually end up — being thrown away.

"What we used to do before was such a waste. A lot of things ended up in a dumpster," remarked Wannida Nivartvong, the university's lecturer in product design. "And since our usual assignments dealt a lot with mock-up cases, the students had a hard time finding out if their ideas could really be used outside of the classroom in real life. Now, they get to make something full-scale. Not just a mock-up model for mock-up cases. Their works must serve a purpose according to their client's request."

An entire semester was dedicated to this project. Wannida's class had 19 students from different countries, which were divided into six groups to make six pieces of furniture for three households. The students had to conduct a site visitation to discuss with the families what they needed around their houses. The lecturer said this project made her students more enthusiastic in class.



RIGHT
Allison Carters and Genie Chang put the finishing touches to the cooking station they made.

BELOW

The students deliver their product to the community.



ABOVE
Chuchart Kumkhiaw, left, with his wife and the students from Assumption University.

“Before they were so chilled out. They came to class late. They lacked motivation. But ever since the beginning of this project, I’ve seen their change in attitude. The kids have become much more attentive and diligent. They worked really hard, knowing what and who they were doing it all for,” she said.

The Pathum Thani community was selected as the first recipient of the furniture in a project that may expand to other areas later.

The households in Pathum Thani were chosen based on need, according to Timothy Loke, CEO of Habitat for Humanity Thailand. With the design students interacting closely with the community, he believes it is a great way of giving back, not in monetary value, but rather in ideas.

“Everything starts from the house,” said Loke. “If parents believe their children are safe at home, they can actually go out and earn a living. So we believe that a house needs to lead to a higher standard of living for the people.”

On a recent weekend, the team from Assumption University and Habitat for Humanity delivered the furniture to the community. Chuchart’s family received a new table with storage space to make *som tam* on, as well as a dining table.

“I was really excited,” said Chuchart. “In the beginning, we were thinking it could be a hoax. It’s impossible that people would come and give things to you for free, that students would come and help.”

Chuchart revealed that he suffers from thalassaemia, which prevents him from doing heavy work. Operating a food stall is one of the few things his health permits him to do. With the addition of new furniture, he believes it will help in attracting more customers and bring in more income for the family. He also plans to improve the scenery and redecorate the stall to complement their new furniture.

“I hope this project continues to help others, too. I’m really grateful for all their help, and I wish others would be able to receive such kindness in the same way as well,” said Chuchart, who profusely thanked the students. His wife also made *som tam* for one of them to take home.

The new cooking station — made from metal frames — can also serve a different purpose in future, said design student Genie Chang. She and her group aim for the table to be adjustable and adaptable to suit different purposes around the house.

“One day, if the family isn’t going to sell *som tam* anymore, they can disassemble the frames and make them into chairs or storage space instead of just a table,” said Chang.

Fellow design student Allison Canters said the project was a good learning experience to interact with people in a different environment, especially outside of the classroom.

“We get to consider more the end user because we have to design specifically to what they need. It relates a bit more to what we’ll end up doing later on — figuring out the clients’ needs and such. So this was certainly a good experience,” Canters said.



The kids have become much more attentive and diligent in class