

# «Smiling Gecko» and «The Gong»

The charity Smiling Gecko began with the story of a girl with a burnt face. This inspired Swiss photographer Hannes Schmid to set up the charity.

Text: Suzanne Schwarz Photos Smiling Gecko



Guests came from near and far for the grand opening ceremony of the cultural center "The Gong"



Students rehearse in the pleasantly naturally air-conditioned auditorium.

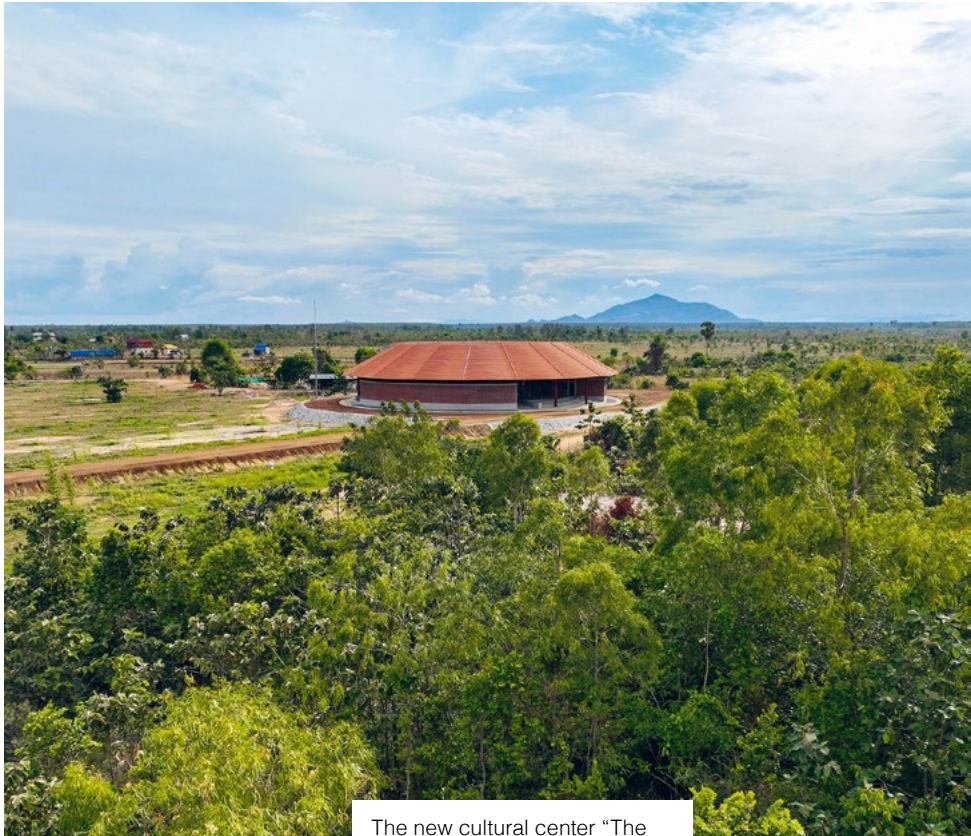
**W**ho doesn't know the handsome Marlboro cowboy, riding into endless freedom? He is an icon of advertising photography and a milestone in the life of the famous Swiss photographer, Hannes Schmid. While on an assignment in Thailand, he came across a veiled girl sitting and begging on the street. He gave her some money. As she reached for it, her veil slipped away. What he saw shocked him deeply: her face was likely scarred by burns inflicted by her relatives to elicit pity while she begged. She was from Cambodia, where this was common practice, she said. Hannes Schmid knew that his life was about to take a different turn and that he had to do something.

**And so, „Smiling Gecko“ was born.**

To this day, he continues to do what needs to be done. He founded the charity Smiling Gecko, raised funds, and bought a plot of land in the countryside. He later bought an even larger plot of land — 150 hectares — 60 kilometres north of Phnom Penh. He found fellow campaigners, built schools and villages, started farming and livestock management, and set up a hotel and restaurant complex that is now considered to be one of the finest resorts in Cambodia. He knew that he had to help people escape the slums, provide children with an education and a dignified future, and enable Cambodia's rural population to lead self-determined lives. The NGO's holistic approach, which



The culinary delights are served in the farmhouse restaurant as well as in the large garden.



The new cultural center "The Gong" is nestled within the "Smiling Gecko" campus.

has flourished ever since, is based on the intertwined pillars of agriculture, livestock farming, production, and trade. Hundreds of children have now received an education, families earn a living by farming for the campus, and young people are trained to become sought-after specialists following the model of Swiss vocational training. The restaurant is one of the best in Asia, while the Farmhouse Resort, with its numerous bungalows, is the main source of income. International tour groups also experience the 'miracle in the jungle' for themselves when the government accommodates its guests there.

The latest project is 'The Gong', the music school on the campus.

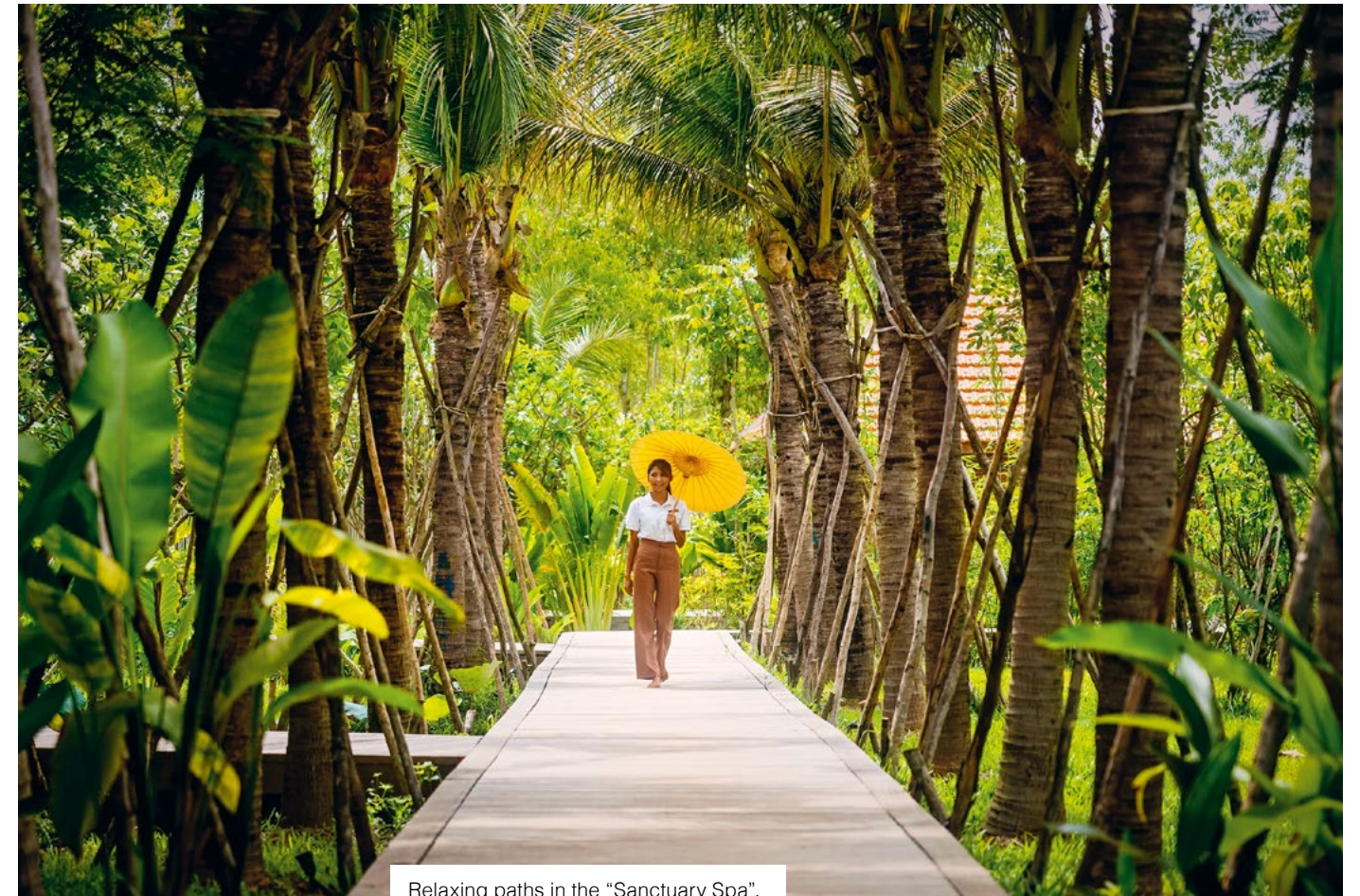
In the architects and founding partners of Atelier Oï – Aurel Aebi, Armand Louis and Patrick Reymond – Hannes Schmid found kindred spirits who were quickly

won over by the project. Since then, Atelier Oï has helped to design various buildings on the 'Smiling Gecko Educational Campus'. The recently completed circular building, 'The Gong', follows the design tradition of the La Neuveville-based firm Atelier Oï, but also showcases their commitment to social responsibility, narrative texture and bioclimatic architecture.

Atelier Oï planned and built a circular building housing a 100-seat auditorium with a stage, a café, a recording studio, a reception area and offices. The building's design was inspired by the gong, a round instrument commonly used in ceremonies and rituals in Cambodian culture. Rising as if on a platform, the building is visibly elevated and thus protected against flooding during the rainy season. The circular form welcomes the wind and allows it to glide along the façade without obstructing it. This also minimises the surface area exposed to sunlight on the east and west



Students neatly leave their shoes at the entrance to the studios integrated into the cultural center.



Relaxing paths in the "Sanctuary Spa", amidst the lush jungle landscape.

sides. At the centre of the building, beneath the set-back circular roof opening, lies the 1.75-metre-deep impluvium. The circular structure then rises in two tiers like an amphitheatre, which can be used as seating around the impluvium, down to ground floor level. Air – Water – Light: The openings between the roof and the outer shell create Venturi effects. Water management within the building is organised via the impluvium. The rainwater collected there is channelled into the nearby reservoir. Sunlight shines into the interior through the roof opening and the outer shell. The architecture plays with the idea of shaping nature and incorporating it into the sensory experience of the building. From above, the building's resemblance to the gong, which inspired its design and gave it its name, is most evident in its form and layout. The building honours architecture, education, and culture. It also embodies the principle of hope, in the belief that this new venue can become a meeting place for modern culture in Cambodia.

Where did the instruments needed for training and concerts come from? Even before the building was constructed a year ago, the project had managed to recruit the renowned Swiss musician and singer Seven. He collected, solicited and organised a wonderful assortment of instruments, which arrived on campus just in time for the opening.

And now? Without the pandemic and the resulting three-year hiatus, the 'Smiling Gecko' would be self-sustaining. As it stands, however, even 'Christmas angels' sometimes need a helping hand.