

up in the hills



Closer to the sun

Building on a verdant, elevated site brings the opportunity for the immediate setting to enhance the broader outlook



Natural affinity

This resort villa combines classic Thai architectural forms with more contemporary elements to create a tropical retreat on high



Above: Suralai Villa combines traditional roof forms with modern, operable glass walls and frameless balustrading. Enjoying a microclimate much cooler than coastal habitations, the island resort sits quietly on the landscape, with only the roof overhangs visible from the approach road. Designed by architect Karl Grebstad and made almost exclusively from locally sourced materials, this Thai resort is focused on sustainability and respect for the environment.

With sand, sea and surf the main attractions on a tropical island, most residences are down at beach level. But building in the hills has its advantages. The climate is cooler and the idyllic views stretch forever.

Nestled high on a lush hillside, Suralai Villa offers immersion in the sights, scents and sounds of Koh Samui, one of Thailand's most popular islands. Developed by Samui Concepts and designed by Map Architecture with Karl Grebstad as project architect, Suralai stands out on the landscape, but its traditional design references are in tune with the surroundings.

Suralai has two principal buildings – the main villa and a connected wing. Both echo the signature element of the resort, an open-sided poolhouse built in classic sala Thai style.

This graceful, steeply roofed structure is typical of northern Thai architecture, now seen here in the south, says Karl Grebstad.

“The living and bedroom villa and bedroom wing have similarly steep, thatched roofs, but with a more contemporary feel – straight not curved and with discreet, concealed gutters. Besides creating a distinctive yet appropriate profile on the terrain, this roof style also makes

for soaring cathedral ceilings on the interiors.”

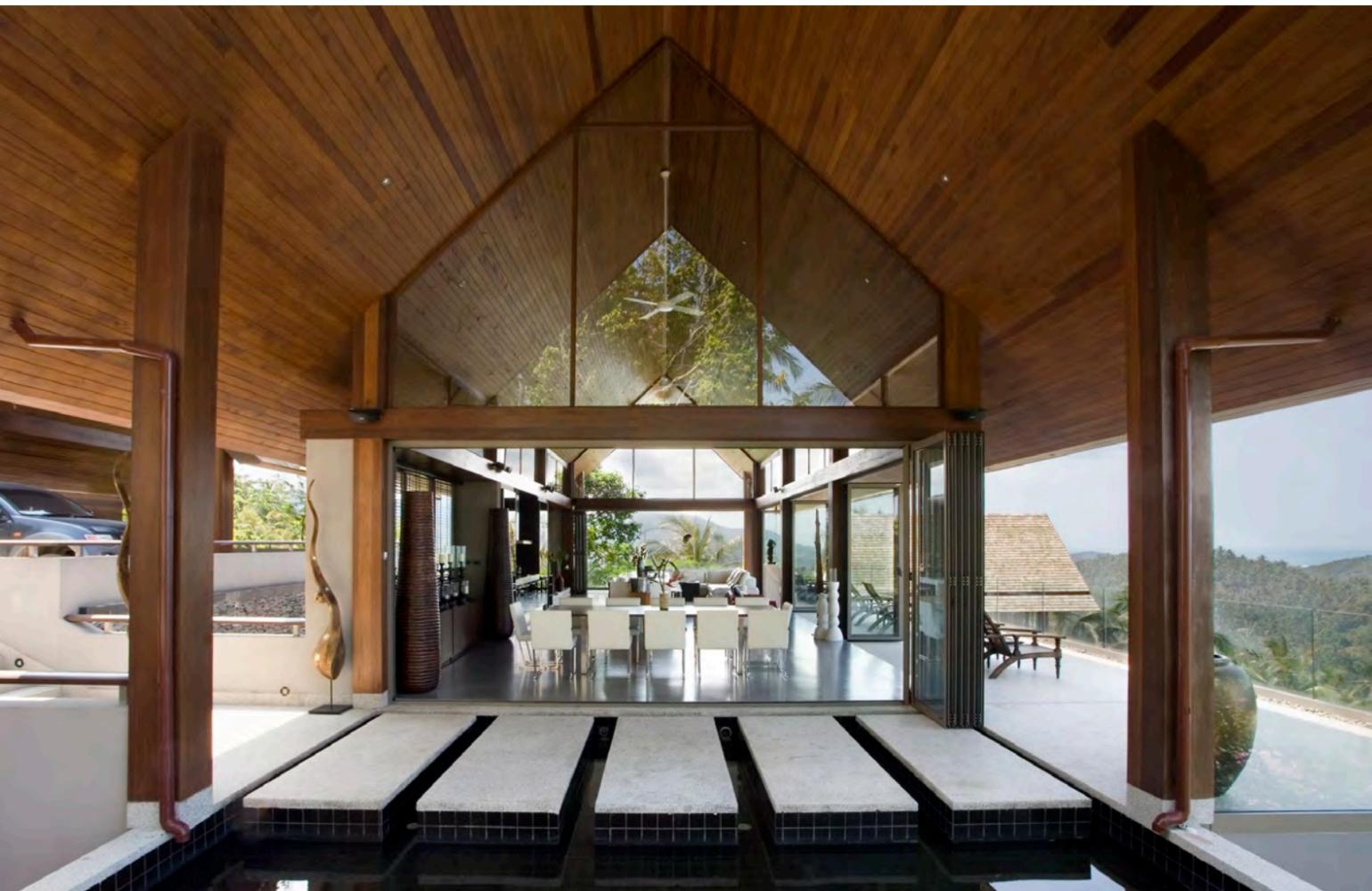
The main villa has a run of open-plan living spaces on the top level, with three bedrooms on levels below. A connecting wing contains three further bedrooms, set one on top of the other. In addition, Suralai Villa has an expansive sun terrace, a 20m-long infinity pool, a gymnasium and landscaped tropical gardens.

Grebstad designed the resort to maximise the impact of the environment for guests. The approach is by road from above, with the full beauty of the spot partly shielded until arrival at the villa and entering the living spaces.



Above: The uppermost bedroom in the bedroom wing looks down over the pool. Nature pervades Suralai at every turn – an infinity edge merges the pool with the distant landscape while a decorative stone edge stands between it and sun terrace. Locally mined slate was used for the floor of the swimming pool.

Left: An open, covered walkway links the villa and the bedroom wing. Locally made sandwashed floors provide all-weather grip underfoot.



“Steps down from the car park and stepping stones set in a carp pond lead to the villa. From here you look through the interior out to the hills and sparkling sea,” says the architect.

As well as mirroring the roofline of the pool house, the villa also follows its open-sided design. Stacking walls of glass on all sides are all that stand between visitors and the open air.

The vista is equally engaging looking back the other way, past the ornamental fish pond to a strategically placed mature flame tree.

While responding to its Thailand setting in terms of architecture, Suralai also respects its



Facing page: Glass transoms extend the walls of glass up under the eaves, optimising natural light. The ceilings are lined in native timber.

Above: Operable clerestory windows and generous roof overhangs help manage the heat of the summer sun.

Left: The kitchen area is set back into the wall so it doesn't interrupt the vista through the interior. Reflective surfaces mean the sumptuous views are reflected in the cabinetry.



Architect: Map Architecture (Hong Kong); design team, Karl Grebstad HKIA, Edward Billson, David Clarke
Developer: Samui Concepts
Builder: SWR Construction
Cladding: Timber
Roof: Shingles
Window and door joinery, hardware: Sun Paradise
Flooring: Sandwash, terrazzo
Paints: Jotun Paint
Lighting: LED from Foshan Jinbang Photoelectricity Technology Co
Pool: Map Architecture
Audiovisual equipment, speakers: Bose
Plasma televisions: Samsung

Story by Charles Moxham
Photography by Yew Chuan Ong and James Robert Fuller



Above and lower right: All six bedrooms have ensuites. The tub and vanity tops have the same sandwash finish as the floors.

Top right: Four-poster beds were selected to accommodate mosquito nets – allowing the doors to be left open to admit night-time breezes.

Facing page: The sala Thai pool house offers an attractive foreground feature, as seen from the main villa above.

environment in other ways. Sustainability was an important part of the design agenda.

In developing the land, Grebstad was careful to work around mature plantings. In addition, some building modifications were made on site to preserve the pristine location.

“As the villa is on a steep slope, retaining walls were integral to the design and these are built from local stone,” says Grebstad. “The steel and concrete pavilion structures are clad in native timber, with floors in a non-slip sandwash finish, made with ground stone, also sourced locally.”

Vents and cross ventilation avoided the need for air conditioning in the living areas, although all six bedrooms do have this amenity.

One of the directors of Samui Concepts, Paul Hicks, helped to select relaxed, contemporary furnishings.

“Suralai sits halfway between a home and private resort – with all the amenities of a retreat, but exclusively for you and your guests.”

View a video and a gallery of additional images at

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