

# Technical Explorations

by Keith R. Bennett

## Bangspace's Bangkok Hackerspace

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**Note: This is a 2018 revised version of the 2010 article; an outdated version but one with photos is available [here](#).**

One of the manifestations of community among IT professionals and enthusiasts is the *hackerspace* (see Wikipedia article at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hackerspace>). A hackerspace is a place where hackers (in the loose sense of the word, that is, benevolent software and hardware enthusiasts) can meet to talk, learn, and work together.

A recent addition to the hackerspaces of the world is Bangspace in Bangkok, Thailand. Bangspace is a modest room on the fifth floor of a small walkup office building near the Ekkamai Skytrain station. The office building is occupied by Proteus Technologies (<http://proteus-tech.com/>), whose owner, Ben Scherrey, is an American member of Bangspace who has donated use of the space.

Bangspace is a bit of a pun; on the one hand, it is an abbreviation for Bangkok Hackerspace, and on the other hand, it describes a two character string containing bang (!) and space ( ). Since a space is difficult to display (indeed, it is invisible), an underscore is sometimes used. So you might see Bangspace expressed as !\_.

Meetings are usually 8:00 PM to midnight or so. Currently, Monday is Drupal night, Tuesday is Android night, and Wednesday is Hardware Hacking night. Every other week is Beercamp, which is a general social evening including, in addition to the human attendees, beer. Unfortunately for me, my time in Bangkok did not include one of these days, so I never got to experience Beercamp.

Bangspace has a membership fee of 500 baht (about \$15 US) per month, but you don't have to join to participate. Ben elaborates: "You don't have to be a member to participate in !\_ but you do have to have a member there willing to be "responsible" for you. Membership gets you a key and voting rights as to what to do when we decide money issues or other things requiring consensus. People join !\_ because they want to support it."

Getting to know the Bangspace folks was one of the major highlights of my stay in Bangkok. Others were:

- teaching a Ruby class (slides [here](#), at the Asian Institute of Technology (<http://www.ait.ac.th/>)
- getting to know Chokchai (my host at AIT), and
- attending the first TED conference in Thailand (<http://www.tedxbkk.com/>).

The Bangspace folks are a diverse and friendly lot, including Thais, Germans, French, Japanese, South Africans, Indians, Americans, and others. They are software developers, graphic artists, entrepreneurs, and more.

Meetings are very informal, with people coming and going any time they feel like it. Sometimes the theme of the meeting is in name only – last night was Android night but we did very little that was Android-related. Nevertheless we all seemed to enjoy the evening. Jean Jordaan, a South African Python and Plone developer working on UN-funded project web sites, found out that he could install Python on his Android phone. Thirty seconds later, he showed me the Python shell on it. The geek in me got excited to see it and before I knew it a "Yeah baby!" leapt out of my mouth...to which Jean jokingly replied "That'll impress the girls"...hmmm, I wonder if he was referring to the Python shell, or my exclamation. 😊

A few minutes later, Jean showed me a bug he encountered running Python on the phone. We looked into it further, and found that it was most likely a bug in the Android Scripting Environment. We didn't find it in the issue tracker, so he's going to submit it.

At last Tuesday's Android session, Adam showed us the Android app he is working on while learning Android. Sugree then made a late appearance and stole the show, sharing with us his formidable expertise and experience with Android. Sugree is rather famous in the Thailand technical community. He is an expert in many areas. After working with Android in his spare time for just a few months, he taught it like a pro. The next day I read an article in the Bangkok Post in which Sugree was quoted; obviously the press views him with similar respect. One of Sugree's distinctions is that of the most prolific tweeter in Thailand, and probably in the world, with 544,111 tweets as of February 4, 2010.

Bangspace's online discussions at the bangkok-space Google group are no longer available, but here is an excerpt about Sugree:

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*31o5:* He [Sugree] is one of the most popular hacker and tweeple in Thailand I guess, surprising that his tweets are not auto or bot, he is a human being 😊

*jfxberns:* I think that's an interesting hypothesis, Satoko. I suggest we do tests on Sugree to see if he really is Human.

*31o5:* is actually sugree human? could be very well designed humanoid.... good for our electronics hacking.

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I wonder if Sugree will show up at electronics hacking night now...

We also had a visit from Nicholas of Singapore who is an investor in technology companies. As I hear it, the Singapore hackerspace is the envy of developers throughout Asia. Perhaps someone can blog or add a comment to this article about it?

About 11:00 or so we started talking about workplace environments, contrasting those of Germany (represented by Jan) and Sweden (represented by Adam) with that of the United States (represented by me). They represent opposite extremes – employers in most U.S. states have a lot of power over their employees, whereas in their countries the employees reign. The problem with the latter is that it stifles entrepreneurship – many who would start businesses in the U.S. would not dare to in Germany or Sweden for fear of not being able to adjust their workforce (i.e. fire a problem or nonperforming worker) if necessary. We all agreed that the optimal solution is a balance of the two.

On Saturday I posted an invitation to collaborate on working with Android. Adam responded, and together we worked on refactoring an Android app he's been writing. There was nobody around with a key to the Bangspace office, so Satoko, a Japanese entrepreneur doing graphic design work for clients in Japan and Thailand, invited us to join her at her office, which is at a convenient location near the Asok Skytrain station. It's a comfortable office with air conditioning and Internet connectivity. Sweet! One of Satoko's contributions to Bangspace is the all important responsibility of stocking the fridge with beer, soda, and bottled water, to enable us to endure the long hacking hours in a hydrated (or, alternatively, mildly inebriated) state. There's a charge for the drinks that includes a modest profit; this helps support Bangspace.

What started as a casual invitation to get dinner together that evening turned into a great time. Satoko suggested a Chinese restaurant near her office that was awesome. She, Adam, Sajal and I are from four different countries on three different continents, and the conversation was truly enriched by that diversity. We stayed there for what seemed like hours, leaving only when the restaurant started closing.

After dinner, Satoko mentioned she was going to get a 100 baht (\$3.00) one hour Thai massage, and agreed to let me tag along. It was the kind of place where you leave your shoes outside the door. After we left, I felt something strange in my shoe and figured I'd better stop and remove it. As soon as I took the shoe off and put it on the ground, a frog jumped out!

What do the dinner, the massage, and the frog have to do with Bangspace? Not very much, directly at least – but it does illustrate that the initial connections made from technical community are seeds from which other experiences can sprout and multiply. My time at Bangspace was less than two weeks, and even so, I have made friends and connections that will likely last a very long time. Put differently, although creating community requires time, energy, and sometimes money, we should never lose sight of the resulting benefits that make it a very wise investment.

I wish I could continue to hang out with the Bangspace folks, but other adventures beckon. I have returned to Chiang Mai today to continue massage school for another week before returning to the States next week.

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