

Phnom Penh: From the Politics of Ruin to the Possibilities of Return

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This article describes the various imaginaries and practices that underlie the contemporary building boom in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. One such imaginary is of a city of absence. In part, this relates to a discourse of the city in ruin, the result of material-historical processes that destroyed Phnom Penh's urban fabric and society in the 1970s. Yet idioms of ruin and absence have been markedly resilient in Phnom Penh; indeed, they were widely appropriated during the colonial and postcolonial eras to justify experiments in city-making and urban-planning interventions. The article thus aims to relate these older representations of absence to contemporary invocations of the city as *tabula rasa* — but an explicitly Asian one. Such representations, which organize perceptions of the city and govern the logics of its space, are key to current planning experiments that are seeking to remake it as the city of the future. With Phnom Penh an emerging space of circulation and a field of intervention, these efforts include a shift to building vertically, with highrise towers, in a town once acclaimed for its French provincial charm.

Cambodia's capital city, Phnom Penh, is located on a floodplain at the confluence of three rivers: the Tonle Mekong, the Tonle Sap, and the Tonle Bassac (*tonle* is "river" in Khmer) (FIG. 1). This joining of waters created a city of four faces, or *les quatre bas* — what in Khmer is known as Krong Chaktomuk.¹ Thus situated, trade has been central to the city's origins.² It has also ensured its commercial and economic future.³ However, future-talk in Phnom Penh today is less focused on the economy of trade than the economy of space, in anticipation of a building boom that will vastly alter its landscape.

With bets placed on its distinctly "Asian" future, investors from South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and China have poured into the city in the past fifteen years. They view Phnom Penh as the Ho Chi Minh City of fifteen years ago, the Bangkok of twenty-five

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FIGURE 1. Historic aerial view of Phnom Penh at the intersection of Tonle Bassac and Tonle Sap. Source: H.G. Ross and D. Collins, *Building Cambodia: New Khmer Architecture 1953–1970* (Bangkok: The Key Publisher, 2006), p.57. Photo by Vann Molyvann.



years ago, and the Seoul of forty years ago. Foreign investors today occupy key sectors of Cambodia’s economy, backing the most ambitious projects in development, banking, insurance, commodity manufacturing, and natural-resource extraction.

Key to these activities is real estate speculation in the capital. Phnom Penh has no master plan.⁴ And it has no formal valuation of property. Yet, development proceeds apace, based on aspirations for the city of the future. As a

postconflict site and a frontier of capitalism, Phnom Penh today boasts one of the most expensive property markets in Southeast Asia (FIG. 2).

In this article I seek to illuminate these forces by providing a brief genealogy of the city’s urbanism, which has had a long and troubled association with modernism. Phnom Penh was a key site of experimentation in what Paul Rabinow has called the “norms and forms” of the modern condition.⁵

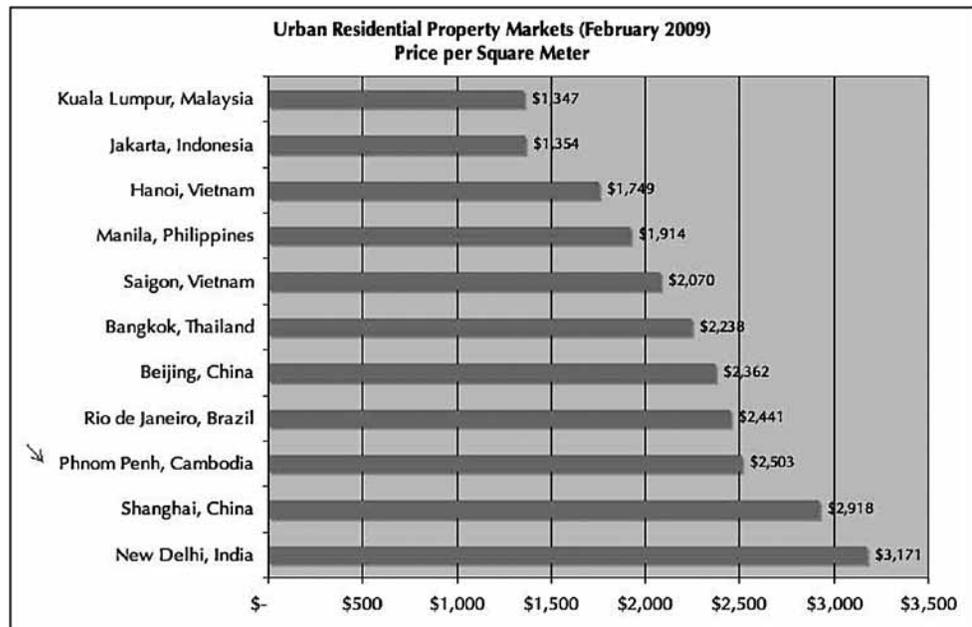


FIGURE 2. Average property prices in cities across the global South. Data from *Global Property Guide*, 2009.

Within French colonial urbanism, Gwendolyn Wright has also identified the city as a privileged experimental terrain and a laboratory of modernity.⁶ More recently, according to Aihwa Ong, the metropolis continues to be a “milieu of experimentation” in global urban modernity.⁷

The historicization I present is both partial and selective. For example, I do not focus on specifically Khmer concepts of power and space, which emphasize the core-periphery nature of authority, difference, and hierarchy.⁸ My purpose is to illustrate the role of Phnom Penh as a locus of experimentation and to describe the perceptions that have been used to justify interventions in its landscape. These perceptions continue to hold critical implications for how the city is being remade.

DECAY AND REBIRTH

Phnom Penh is the “great metropolis” or the “primate city” of Cambodia.⁹ Primacy is a feature found throughout Southeast Asia, where urban culture is heavily concentrated in the capital city of each country.¹⁰ Contemporary Phnom Penh is also principally Haussmannesque in orientation, which is

most obvious in terms of the major boulevards that intersect its geometric grid (FIG. 3).¹¹

The city’s layout is a legacy of the high modernism of colonial and postindependence urbanism.¹² This movement (and its related technology of urban planning) was rooted in an ideology and practice of rational order, which was explicitly visual and aligned with modernism’s faith in progress and efficiency. Yet, in Phnom Penh, the high modernism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was primarily aesthetic, rather than structural or social.

Historically, Phnom Penh’s colonial urban form was forged through two major efforts in planning. The first came in the 1890s under Daniel Fabré; the second was carried out under Ernest Hébrard in the 1920s. During both periods, French administrators sought to legislate new patterns of space in response to what they perceived to be the disorder of the capital and its social structure.¹³ In part, this perception involved the city’s ethnic heterogeneity. Ethnic districts, first created in the 1880s, were codified in the 1920s.¹⁴ French colonial urban regimes were also tax regimes. In the 1890s they allowed the French to gain access to the city’s rentier wealth. And taxes on rice funded the beautification of the city in the 1920s.¹⁵

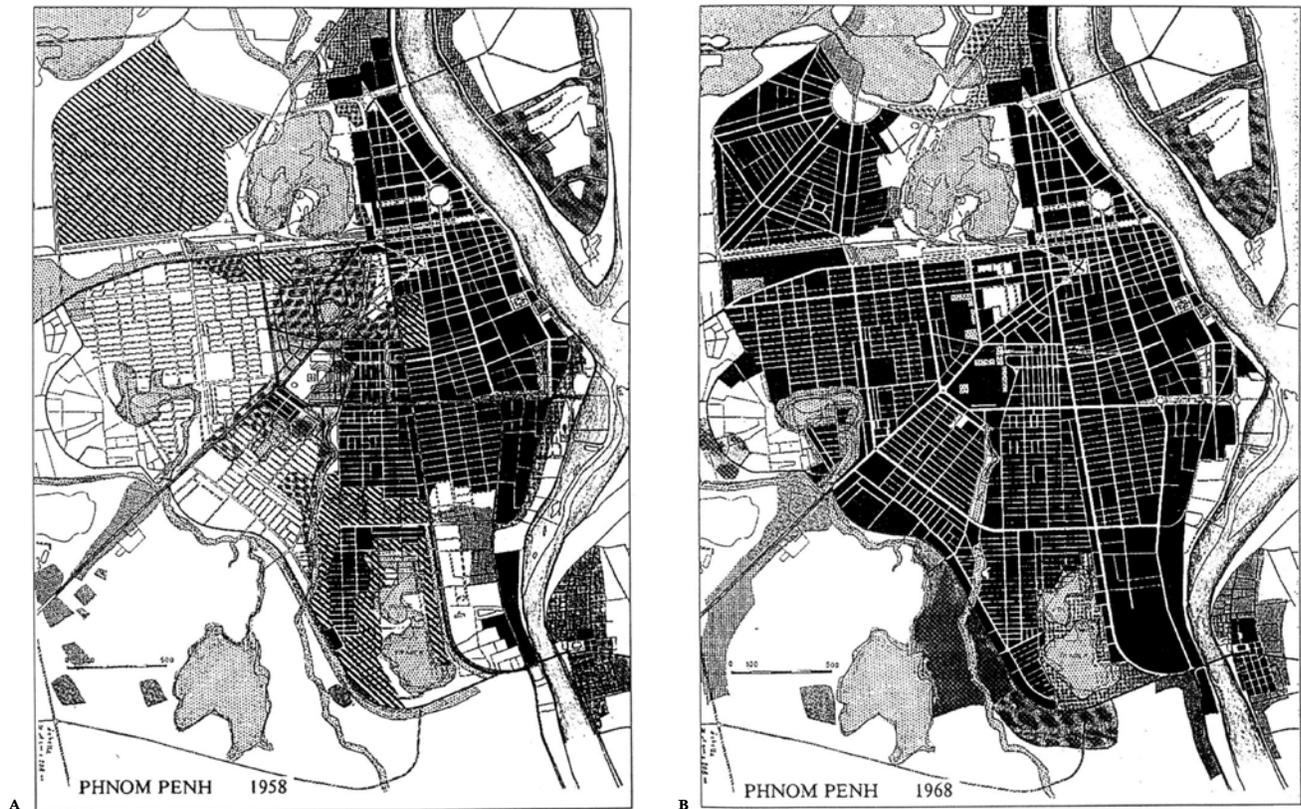


FIGURE 3. *Phnom Penh in 1958 (A), and 1968 (B).* Expansion of the city during the postcolonial period extended the colonial spatial order outlined by Ernest Hébrard in 1925. The “urban” areas of the city are marked in black. The pace of urbanization over a ten-year period is notable. Boeung Kak is the area being surrounded by development at the top center. The Front de Bassac waterfront is at the middle right. Source: V. Molyvann, *Modern Khmer Cities (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2003)*, pp.158–59.

When the French initially arrived in Phnom Penh in 1860, they did not see it as worthy of being a capital.¹⁶ Moreover, they saw the Kingdom of Cambodia as “only a shadow of its former self.”¹⁷ In response to these imaginaries (in which the city was defined negatively as a set of absences or deficiencies), they sought to modernize Phnom Penh’s appearance. This was articulated as a rebirth, with architecture central to the making of a “real” capital. Under French guidance, new buildings would be built with the permanence of concrete to replace a city of thatch and bamboo. The rebirth was also explicitly spatial, enacted through the culture and politics of urban design.

The project of Cambodian rebirth was also temporal, created through the power-knowledge construction of a history based on continuity and linearity. The historian David Chandler has argued that the greatest gift the French bestowed on Indochina was its history.¹⁸ But this gift was not benign. Colonial scholars narrated Cambodian history as an arc — one that peaked in the tenth and eleventh centuries during the golden age of Angkor, when great mortuary temple complexes served as the center of a Khmer Empire that dominated much of mainland Southeast Asia. This was followed by a precipitous and protracted period of decline, from which it was the job of French scholars and colonial administrators to reclaim it. According to Chandler, “The history of Angkor, after all, was deciphered, restored, and bequeathed to them by their colonial masters. Why had so many forgotten it?”¹⁹

Far from being forgotten, the weight of antiquity has since been a key element of Cambodian identity. The role of the past is apparent in the country’s flag, which has the unusual distinction of featuring a monument of ancient built heritage: Angkor Wat. Indeed, the fear of disappearance has been an enduring theme of modern Cambodian nationalism. The same can be said for authenticity, which under the French became a hegemonic discourse that was both material and visual.²⁰

This colonially constructed history was predicated on what Benedict Anderson (borrowing from Walter Benjamin) has referred to as “homogenous, empty time” — made linear and continuous, flattened of its heterogeneity and internal contradictions, and treated as a timeless essence.²¹ Yet, such recitation of Cambodia’s former greatness — and the constant reference to it as an achievement and a loss — was not exclusively about the reconstruction of the past; it was also about the regulation of the present. That is, the past was made performative, to cast shadows on the present. According to Edward Said, history was a central component of the colonial project, its purpose being to tell of “modern orientals [who] were degraded remnants of a former greatness.”²² Orientalism’s citational structure, for Derek Gregory, involved truth claims designed to produce the effects they named.²³ This “gift” of history, then, was a form of what Gayatri Spivak has termed “epistemic violence,” knowledge that could not be separated from the structure of imperialism under which it was produced.²⁴

In urban design and architecture, the aesthetics of space were also based on the cult of history, evidenced through “invented traditions” of culture. As Eric Hobsbawm has noted, such traditions are created not only in reference to the past, but to a suitable past.²⁵ A key element of this aesthetic in Cambodia was a “national style” that allowed a specific reconfiguration of history and authenticity. As Penny Edwards has argued, this desire for authenticity in the redesign of Phnom Penh was based on French fears about a vanishing Khmer race and an influx of foreign, non-Khmer elements in the city.²⁶ But Rabinow has argued that this desire was also part of the project of modernity that motivated the French in their search for legitimacy and greatness, as well as tradition and progress.²⁷ In the early twentieth century, key institutions of Cambodian culture — the Pali School, Musée Khmer, School of Fine Arts, Royal Library, and several elite schools added to Phnom Penh’s Cambodian quarter — were thus founded and designed wholly, or in part, by French architects and savants.²⁸

Architecture and urbanism were clearly important instruments of the French colonial project in Cambodia. Shirine Hamadeh has argued that visual culture was the most accessible technology of French policy in its reproduction of order in North Africa.²⁹ And Wright has showed how France was explicit in cultivating a “national” style in its Indochina colonies, as well as in Madagascar and Morocco, reflecting a conscious effort to combine modernist forms with “traditional” motifs. This stylized aesthetic divided cities as never before, even if the division was made to appear natural and coherent.³⁰ Thus, in Phnom Penh, French architects were keen to adapt tradition in the service of spectacle in their retrofit of the Royal Palace. Following the demolition of its original wooden structures, the present palace, which opened in 1870, was rebuilt in concrete. Yet, despite the hybrid origins of its design, the new building eventually came to symbolize the essence of the monarchy and the nation.³¹ Thus, a century later, following the depredations of the Khmer Rouge, its sense of timeless essence was embraced with nostalgia by Milton Osborne: “. . . as a whole there was no doubting the city’s Cambodian character, something that had as much to do with the pace of life as with the distinctive architecture of the royal palace or the bright yellow, green, and blue tiles on the roofs of the dozens of Buddhist pagodas.”³²

As a general practice, modernity and urbanism were elaborated in the colonies to be transferred back to the metropole.³³ But the order worked in reverse with regard to Phnom Penh. Experiments to create a Cambodian national style took place at World Fairs in France — specifically the 1906 and 1922 colonial exhibitions in Marseille and the 1889 and 1931 exhibitions in Paris. Developed by French architects and engineers for a Parisian and an international audience, the style was then transcribed back onto the face of Phnom Penh.³⁴ These fairs also made recognizable specific idioms of visuality. As Edwards has written, the colonial period “saw a redefinition of Khmer culture and its emergence into the public sphere of the

modern nation.³⁵ According to Rabinow, this was prompted in part by French imperial desire, which sought to reconstitute the power of Paris on the margins of empire.³⁶

With the consolidation of French interests in Indochina, Phnom Penh was first designated the administrative center of the colony in 1867.³⁷ But it was not until the 1890s, when fiscal and legislative mechanisms were put in place, that the French were able to exert rule over the city and centralize control of it.³⁸ In particular, this involved making space legible to increase land values and capitalize rents.³⁹ According to the governor general of Indochina, the reforms of the late nineteenth century were designed “to enhance our prestige, and that of Norodom [Cambodia’s king, 1860–1904], in the eyes of his subjects and of foreigners, by making Phnom Penh a real capital.”⁴⁰ For Panivong Norindr, this indicated how Indochina was an “elaborate fiction,” made material through architecture and other visual mediums.⁴¹ But for experts in geography and architecture, it was also a “rational creation of France,” in which France sought to give “her dominion a viable form, a solid geographical cohesion.”⁴² This involved technologies like the map, the census, and the museum, which, according to Anderson, “profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion — the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry.”⁴³

Reforms in 1884 also redirected customs, taxes and concessions into French hands, providing the financing necessary to rebuild the city.⁴⁴ In a speech inaugurating the municipality of Phnom Penh in 1884, the governor of Indochina, Charles Thomson, specifically linked these colonial mechanisms to a desire for renewal. Presciently, he claimed, “I have seen how the longing has become more pronounced . . . for a new state of things and a coming revival.”⁴⁵ More importantly, the reforms marked the first effort to create a regime of private property. According to the first article of the convention colonial officials forced the king to sign with the French protectorate: “The territory of Cambodia, up to today the exclusive property of the Crown, is declared property of the State.”⁴⁶ Thus a system based on temporary land grants and rental agreements that had proved profitable for the king was replaced by a real estate market that allowed the purchase and transfer of urban property.⁴⁷ This regime was further codified in an 1897 ordinance: “The government reserves the right to alienate and to assign all the free lands of the kingdom. The buyers and the grantees will enjoy full property rights over the land sold or assigned to them.”⁴⁸

As a result of this opening of its territory, the city underwent a construction boom overseen by the new municipality.⁴⁹ And during subsequent years key institutions of French administration were built. These included a school to cultivate elite native administrators to collect taxes and dispense justice for an expanding bureaucracy.⁵⁰ They included military barracks for a standing army. And they included key institutions to facilitate the transfer and movement of money

and goods — among which were a treasury, a post office, and offices for the newly established municipality.

According to Edwards, these buildings, a number of which still survive, “completed the capital’s transformation from a rambling morass into a highly segregated and hierarchal city.”⁵¹ The build-up of administrative capacity during this period reflected the rationality of “colonial governmentality,” by which “power comes to be directed at the destruction and reconstruction of colonial space so as to produce not so much extractive-effects on colonial bodies as governing-effects on colonial conduct.”⁵² Yet this construction of order — the creation of bureaucracy and the formation of institutions of power — had less to do with what Michel Foucault has described as governmentality, or the art of government (with the population as its target and welfare as its purpose⁵³), than with the active construction of French sovereignty over Cambodian territory. Eventually, therefore, what the French could not create in the form of industry and commerce they sought through the taxation of the population.⁵⁴ As Chandler has pointed out, by the early twentieth century the country was an “efficient revenue-producing machine.”⁵⁵ At the same time, the French made no efforts to modernize Cambodia’s economy.⁵⁶

Later policies for colonial cities were also forged with the anxieties and problems of France in mind. According to Wright, these included “poor sanitation, economic stagnation, class and ethnic antagonisms, fears about immorality and aesthetic squalor.”⁵⁷ And both Wright and Rabinow have argued that the colonial environment was a laboratory to elaborate technologies of architecture, urban planning, and public health to address problems not of the colonized but of the colonizer.⁵⁸ Thus the anxieties of modern city planning and the role of Phnom Penh as an experimental site brought only superficial change.

In the 1920s, as the first director of the Service d’Urbanisme de l’Indochine, Ernest Hébrard led the master-planning of the cities of Hanoi, Phnom Penh, Saigon and Dalat.⁵⁹ In his own words, he came from a tradition of town planners for whom the colonies were “experimental grounds.”⁶⁰ Colonial cities were tabulas rasas, far removed from the dead weight of metropolitan bureaucracy, with their scale idealized for easy manipulation.⁶¹ True to modernist form, Hébrard also deplored what he saw as the physical expression of disorder.⁶² He sought the city’s rationalization through the expansion of the grid as well as the regulation of race. Accordingly, his “Plan d’Extension de la Ville de Phnom-Penh” was an attempt to organize the city along ethnic lines to deal with its confusing array of races and nationalities.⁶³

Nezar AlSayyad has argued that colonial urbanism was an expression of dominance through institutions of knowledge, planning, and urban form.⁶⁴ But dominance was also based on representational power. Thus, to cite Timothy Mitchell, the appearance of order was linked to the order of appearance.⁶⁵ Through forms of visual production (including artistic production⁶⁶) the French sought to constitute stability

FIGURE 4. Street life in 1950, with Psar Thmei, the city's Art Deco central market, opened in 1937, in the background. The city's celebrated neatness was also one of emptiness. Photo by Associated Press, June 27, 1950.



and create the appearance of coherence in Phnom Penh, even in its absence (FIG. 4).

Whatever the power of representation and its disciplinary capacity, however, power thus deployed (and the order of the city that emerges) must be understood as delinked from the actual management of local society and economy. Nevertheless, such practices were crucial to the construction of colonial Phnom Penh. Through them, the idiom of rebirth was made a productive, with the city serving as the translation ground for an assembled aesthetics of power and culture.

Phnom Penh's rebirth therefore was not only animated by a particular imagination of absence, but it was linked to anxieties about the "moral degeneracy and physical deterioration" of France.⁶⁷ Through a nexus of culture and empire, French strategies of representation facilitated the transplantation of strategic discourses of disappearance and decline.⁶⁸

EMERGENCE

Following the end of French colonial rule in 1953 Phnom Penh entered a "golden age" of postindependence urbanism. Today, representations of this period, encompassing the late 1950s and 1960s, starkly contrast with those of Phnom Penh as a city of ruins in the 1970s and 1980s (FIG. 5). Tradition and authenticity were the crucial urban coordinates of this brief golden age. However, they also served as justifications for the city's dismantling under the Khmer Rouge.

Postindependence urbanism in Cambodia was an explicitly modernist project that sought to articulate its legacy in built form. By contrast, the Khmer Rouge's project was temporal and Arcadian. But Khmer Rouge control of Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 left an equal, if not greater, legacy on Phnom Penh (FIG. 6). Representations of the latter period underscore the city's exit from history in 1975, and its reentry



FIGURE 5. Phnom Penh circa 1986. Street unknown. Photo courtesy of Paul Joseph.



FIGURE 6. In January 1979 Vietnamese troops expel the Khmer Rouge from Phnom Penh. Psar Thmei is in the background. Source: Time Magazine, "The Rise and Fall of the Khmer Rouge." Photo by Bettmann/Corbis.

as a postconflict site only after an internationally brokered peace accord in 1993.

While the Khmer Rouge underwrote much of Phnom Penh's spectrality and decay by emptying it of its population, years of war had already done much to destroy it.⁶⁹ As noted by Sophie Clement-Charpentier, civil war (1970–1975) ruined the physical fabric of Phnom Penh before the Khmer Rouge destroyed its social fabric.⁷⁰ Both forms of ruin, constituted through the material violence of ideology and the deliberate dismantling of urban life, continue to haunt the city through new imaginaries of absence today.

The cosmopolitanism and visual order of Phnom Penh in the 1960s allowed the city to be heralded as “prettiest capital in Southeast Asia.”⁷¹ But these qualities were as fragile as the political landscape on which they rested. Under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (generally translated as the People's Socialist Community) associated nation-building with city-building. And the accomplishments of the period have been celebrated in Anglophone accounts as visionary, based on an elegance of hybrid forms, vernacular Khmer techniques, and monumental proportions.⁷² Phnom Penh, in particular, was allowed to flourish in new ways that accorded with the calculus of high modernism — making society legible by linking modernity, and thus legitimacy, to symbolic order.

That this order was dismantled in less than fifteen years, however, signaled both the fragility of the vision as well as the urban condition. The predominant ideology of the Sangkum was Buddhist socialism.⁷³ According to Sihanouk, modernity would be created within the ethics of Buddhism.⁷⁴ This included plans for the wholesale modernization of the nation through the development of infrastructure, agriculture, education, health, industry, tourism, culture and urbanism. Though many of these plans were never implemented, experiments in urban planning gave a new legibility to Phnom Penh through public architecture. Under the patronage of Sihanouk and employing the designs of the famed architect Vann Molyvann, an emerging urban elite took to conceiving, defining and building “modern Khmer culture” based on forms recognized as both Cambodian and modern, thus establishing themselves as visionaries of a postindependence modernity.⁷⁵

As Ingrid Muan has argued, however, postindependence forms of visual production carried traces of the colonial regime. Colonial rule had established institutions of “Cambodian arts” that taught correct forms of practice, according to which students could be trained to produce “authentic” art objects.⁷⁶ Under these conditions, even modern architecture could not escape notions of tradition, but rather became an articulation of it.⁷⁷ The aestheticization of space during this period also reflected, in the words of David Harvey, an “aestheticization of politics,” as social forces attempted to articulate traditional symbols from the past into the future.⁷⁸

The coherence of this urban vision began to unravel long before the arrival of the Khmer Rouge in 1975. By September

1972, some 700,000 refugees had crowded into Phnom Penh. This urban influx had begun in the 1950s.⁷⁹ But it peaked in the early 1970s as the U.S. engaged in a massive cross-border bombing campaign. The attacks targeted the use of Cambodian territory as staging areas for North Vietnamese troops and supplies moving to battlegrounds in the south.⁸⁰ From 1971 to 1972 the U.S. dropped more than half a billion tons of bombs on the Cambodian countryside, devastating many populated areas.⁸¹ The eventual internal displacement of nearly two million people corresponded to the number who sought refuge in Cambodia's cities.⁸²

By April 1975, as the civil war between the Khmer Rouge and the Lon Nol government that had overthrown Sihanouk in 1970 also reached its climax, an estimated two to three million residents and refugees crowded into Phnom Penh.⁸³ The influx changed the character of the city's population from a coterie loyal to Sihanouk to an urban peasantry seeking safety from the fighting in the surrounding countryside (FIG. 7). Meanwhile, insurgents brought a slow strangulation of the city, periodically depriving it of needed food and supplies. In the end, the city itself became a sort of refugee camp where scarcity prompted the dismantling of its very fabric to obtain building materials and other resources.⁸⁴

Saigon's fall to Communist forces on April 30, 1975, is generally heralded as marking the end of the Second Indochina War (1960–1975). But the Khmer Rouge's entry into Phnom Penh a few weeks earlier, on April 17, had already signaled the end of the first phase of Cambodia's civil war. The arrival of the Khmer Rouge was taken, at least momentarily, to mean the liberation of the city from corrupt military rule; and initially it offered the prospect for a return to normalcy. But the Khmer Rouge's view of culture was based on a linear conception of history, which required a return to a precolonial past to renew the body politic. And where the high modernism of the postindependence period had privileged the urban terrain of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge set out to reconfigure the town and country divide by privileging the latter.

Conceiving of Phnom Penh as a site of imperialism and impurity, the Khmer Rouge began their campaign to rewrite history with the erasure of its urban body politic. Over the course of several days in April 1975, they emptied the city of its inhabitants. Long-time residents and refugees alike were forcibly marched out to the countryside, which would be the new site of modernity. For Marx, cities transformed peasants into citizens and rescued society from “the idiocy of rural life.”⁸⁵ This calculus of progress was radically inverted by the Khmer Rouge, who sought to turn all citizens into peasants.⁸⁶

Changing the name of the country to Democratic Kampuchea, the Khmer Rouge sought to transform Cambodia into an agrarian autarky. Henceforth, the uneducated peasant would become the idealized subject of a self-sufficient utopia. Khmer Rouge policies also called for the abolition of money, markets, and private property to overturn the existing coordinates of society and economy. Yet during these years of

FIGURE 7. *The city of refugees. These refugees are seeking shelter in the shell of the Cambodiana Hotel, part of the 1960s waterfront development undertaken by Sihanouk. Photo by Neal Ulevich, Associated Press, March 11, 1975.*



radical collectivization, an estimated one million people died from starvation and internal purges.⁸⁷ This corresponded to a total 1970 population of only just more than 7 million.⁸⁸

The Khmer Rouge governed through terror as well as “necropolitics.” According to Achille Mbembe, “necropolitics” is a regime of sovereignty based on the principle of excess, with death made to no longer matter.⁸⁹ The regime’s desire to reinstate the “real” Cambodia and emancipate the country from structures of dependency and the degeneracy of the colonial condition required terror to realize the teleos of history.⁹⁰ Yet, ironically, the very cult of history that prompted the regime to seek to return to an economy of primitive accumulation was itself a legacy of the colonial encounter.

Despite the violence done to Phnom Penh during the years of Khmer Rouge rule, the last decade has seen the city rebound. Indeed, its very status as a postconflict site is now heralded for its productive potential, which has been leveraged through contemporary investment practices.

Accompanying the present boom, however, is nostalgia for the city’s postindependence modernism and the brief coherence of that vision. According to one recent account:

Previously a French colonial outpost, the Cambodian capital was catapulted into an acclaimed city that bustled energy through wider international contact. Visionary Cambodian architects took the lead and were largely responsible for the look of a place that soon became the envy of Cambodia’s Southeast Asia neighbors — by the mid-1960s Phnom Penh was dubbed “the belle of Southeast Asia.”⁹¹

But, as argued above, the celebrated beauty of this city of the late 1950s and 60s was based on the aestheticization of space and politics. It also produced a specific form of

disavowal. Underlying this beauty was an urban condition that alienated and radicalized young Cambodian students, who turned to the Khmer Rouge, disenchanted with the very forms of modernity now wistfully remembered.

As I show below, the present nostalgia is also an ethical claim against new experimental forms of contemporary planning and urban growth. As the frenetic rebuilding of Phnom Penh proceeds, it thus embodies both reaction to contemporary urbanism and longing for the lost coherence of an imagined past.

SPECULATING ON THE FUTURE

Controversial projects abound in Phnom Penh today. Cambodia’s topography mirrors the shape of “a crude bowl.”⁹² Combined with the city’s location on a delta, this has made the management of land synonymous with the management of water.⁹³ Given these topographic conditions, land reclamation has been, and continues to be, fundamental to the production of new urban space.

New land was first made available in Phnom Penh through the drainage and infill of its *boeungs*, or catchment areas, between 1928 and 1935.⁹⁴ The interior canals of the city were also filled in at this time. Among these were Quai Piquet (today Street 108) and Quai de Verneville (Street 106) in the European quarter, which were transformed into prominent boulevards, lined with ministerial buildings, banking headquarters, and shophouses. Great expanses of land were also created through the building of dikes beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the early 1970s.⁹⁵ Indeed, the present city’s major boulevards — Preah Sihanouk, Monivong, and Mao Tse Tung — were once embankments that marked its former boundaries.⁹⁶ Other prominent proj-

ects on former swampland and *boeungs* have included the Front du Bassac development of the 1960s and the present reclamation of Boeung Kak (FIG. 8).

The creation of new land at Boeung Kak, in the center of the city, illustrates many of the forces now shaping Phnom Penh's speculative reconstruction. The area occupied by this lake once belonged to the municipality.⁹⁷ However, it was privatized as part of a massive selloff of state assets that began during the 1997 national elections, and has continued by various means, including transfers of ownership to quasi-public entities, the creation of concessionary rights, and outright sales.⁹⁸ It is unclear how many times "ownership" of the 133-hectare lake has changed hands according to these mechanisms. But in February 2007 it was finally sold to the private Cambodian developer Shukaku, whose connections to the ruling Cambodian People's Party has allowed it to push through a highly controversial development scheme.

The shallow lake is located in one of the most favorable sites in the city.⁹⁹ Indeed, it was identified by planning documents in 2007 as a future enclave for the offices of international businesses.¹⁰⁰ The first stage of the Shukaku plan includes the filling in of a majority of its 133 hectares and the geotechnical stabilization of the resulting terrain. After this, Shukaku likely will function as a broker, selling construction rights to foreign developers. Long-term, the plan calls for the creation of a green belt with new recreational, commercial and residential facilities.

The major controversy surrounding the plan involves the eviction of an estimated four thousand families who have been living around the margins of the lake (the actual number of people living legally or illegally there is unknown).¹⁰¹ The insecurity of these residents' tenure was identified years ago, and their eviction has been a constant possibility.¹⁰² Nevertheless, it is now interpreted as indicative of the im-



FIGURE 8. A) Boeung Kak lake in August 2008. B) Photo taken from the same location in August 2009. The informal houses in the background have been replaced by fill, and the lake has been cleared of vegetation. Photos by author.

pact of the recent speculative boom on the city's poor.¹⁰³ In particular, human rights advocates claim the site belongs to those who live on it. Yet, foreign experts earlier decried the physical plight of the area, calling it a "cesspit," and "one of the most dirty places in the city."¹⁰⁴

Much of this dilemma has to do with the history of the site. The edges of Boeung Kak were originally developed by the Popular Revolutionary Committee of Phnom Penh in the 1980s as public green space with recreational amenities.¹⁰⁵ However, the prospect of the first democratic elections following the fall of the Khmer Rouge, in 1993, not only signaled coming peace but precipitated a wave of squatting throughout the city. Indeed, such activity was encouraged by office-seekers as part of their patronage campaigns.¹⁰⁶ Land around Boeung Kak was first invaded by squatters in 1991; but there was a dramatic increase in the number of people living there by the 1997 elections. By 2000, it was estimated three thousand families were living "illegally" in the area.¹⁰⁷ As Beng Hong Socheat Khemro has argued, their presence was tolerated because their landlords were commanders in the military and police, and occupation of the land was legitimized by such connections to authority.¹⁰⁸

The Front du Bassac reveals another speculative face of Phnom Penh. Built on reclaimed land on the banks of the Tonle Bassac beginning in the 1960s, it was designed to become "the new urban center of Phnom Penh."¹⁰⁹ As an urban-planning centerpiece during Phnom Penh's modernist "golden age," it soon became the site of key institutions of public life and culture, including Chaktomuk Hall, the Preah Sura-marit Theater, municipal housing (what is now the Phnom Penh Center office block and the still-inhabited Grey Building), and public parks surrounding the Independence Monument.¹¹⁰

The Front du Bassac remains present in renderings of the city's future. Yet new proposals for development in the area indicate how the terms of engagement have changed.

One of these targets is a site further south along the Bassac riverfront near the Russian Embassy on Sothea's Boulevard. The project, the International Finance Complex (IFC), by Seoul-based GS Engineering and Construction, was originally valued at \$1 billion and scaled to include several fifty-story skyscrapers.¹¹¹ Due to market conditions, in 2009 it had to be reduced in scope.¹¹² And it is now unclear if it will materialize at all. But such plans, based on speculative expectations, have driven up land prices across the city.¹¹³

Such speculation is practiced by various segments of the population. While resources vary considerably, its practitioners negotiate risk, compete for desirable assets, and construct markets of opportunity. Among the platforms they use are regional circuits of capital and expertise such as the Korean one behind the IFC project. These circuits have been forged as part of the legacy of recent urban development in Asia, where cities have been developed at breakneck speed in places that were agrarian hinterland only a generation ago. Such circuits indicate how urban practices in the region no longer refer to the city of EuroAmerica, but to an Asian city of the future.¹¹⁴

The imagination and discourse of this new urbanism are made intelligible through specific "Asian" idioms of growth and possibility (FIG. 9). Consistent with this mode of thinking, Phnom Penh has been cast as possessing near-certain potential to repeat the spectacular growth trajectory of such other Asian capitals as Bangkok, Saigon and Seoul. This is not a case of global urban mimicry, where a single template moves from West to the East in teleological form. Rather, the structures and circuits of urban referencing provoke a rethinking of relationships between centers, peripheries and frontiers, as well as the productivities associated with them. It has also been based on massive, multibillion-dollar projects that were conceived at a time when foreign ownership was officially banned (though these rules have relaxed since 2009), and where ownership rules over land continue to be complex and diffuse.



FIGURE 9. *The city's upwards expansion.* Photo by Sylyvann Borei.



FIGURE 10. A train sits idle at Phnom Penh's railway station, built in 1932 during the city's colonial expansion. In the background is Canadia Bank's new headquarters. Photo by Chea Phal.

Such forms of investment have been a distinctive feature of the Asian regional economy since the 1980s.¹¹⁵ Of the \$1.1 billion in foreign investment approved by the Cambodian government in 2007, \$991 million came from within Asia (FIG. 10). This amounted to approximately 90 percent of total foreign investment that year. The principal countries of origin were Malaysia (\$226 million), Thailand (\$168 million), Vietnam (\$138 million), China (\$137 million), and South Korea (\$86 million). The amounts pledged from each country may vary considerably from year to year; nevertheless, the top sources of foreign investment in Cambodia over the last decade have all been Asian. And even though the total figure for 2007 may be unimpressive in global terms, in relative terms, foreign investment in Cambodia increased five-fold from 2000 to 2007, from \$185 million to \$1.1 billion. The country's GDP growth shows why: it averaged a growth rate of 9.5 percent per year from 2000 to 2007, the fastest in Asia after China (its average 9.9 percent per year).¹¹⁷

Fundamental to such investment trends have been ethnic-based transnational networks.¹¹⁶ In this regard, the Korean networks discussed here comprise only one of the circuits of inter-Asian urbanism by which flows of money and expertise reach Cambodia. But their relational practices and speculative techniques reveal a dialectical process that may be mutually beneficial for two countries not normally associated with each other. In Phnom Penh, Korean developers are presently involved in planning and building a number of highrises and satellite cities. Most prominent are Gold Tower 42, developed by Yon Woo, and CamKo City, a satellite community on the urban periphery. As indicated by its name, Gold Tower will be 42 stories tall. It will occupy a corner of one of the city's most congested intersections, at Monivong and Sihanouk Boulevards (FIG. 11).

Projects such as these and the International Finance Complex (IFC) on the southern waterfront of Tonle Bassac,



FIGURE 11. Gold Tower 42 in July 2010. The developer, Yon Woo, has called itself the "symbolic global developer" for Phnom Penh. The project is financed by DaeHan Real Estate Investment Trust, whose parent company is the Military Mutual Aid Association, one of the largest pension funds in South Korea. Photo by author.

are disproportionately vertical, in contrast to the layout and scale of the city. The tallest existing building in the vicinity of the proposed Gold Tower is the five-story Suzuki showroom, which sits diagonally across the intersection from it. As to why Koreans insist on building at such high densities, as one developer put it, “We saw Seoul emerge from ruin. We hope to see it in Phnom Penh.”¹¹⁸

INTER-ASIAN CIRCUITS

In part, such distinctively Asian forces of development illuminate the machinations of regional cosmopolitanism in an economy of representations. Such an economy clearly privileges spaces in the city that cohere to Asian norms — norms themselves lauded as foundational to economic development. It also relies on modernist imaginaries of absence. As I have shown, these have a long history in Phnom Penh. But they have now been put to use in the service of a distinctly Asian notion of a postconflict tabula rasa.

Cities like Seoul, Tokyo and Saigon — former postconflict sites themselves due to wars and occupations — were reassembled by shedding the weight of history and building anew. Such inter-Asian referencing also defines continuity of form, in which Asian modes of urbanism are identifiable laterally across disparate cities, uprooted and implanted on emerging frontiers in the region. The frontier in this case is proximal rather than distant, and allows for a level of flexibility inhered in commonalities of being Asian (FIG. 12).

Such urbanism is also made possible by market logics and historical confluences underlying the rhetoric of an “Asian miracle.” In actuality, this construction has relied as much on myth as material fact. It was also largely reconfigured by the financial crises of the late 1990s. Yet it remains an important regulating myth precisely because it unhinged the even larger myth of what constitutes paradigmatic economic growth. One of its most significant features is that all

ostensible Asian miracles have been produced under authoritarian rather than democratic political regimes. Thus, what the Asian miracle has principally confounded is the prescription that successful economic development must be predicated on uniform political — i.e., democratic — development. In each case of successful, if not miraculous, economic development in Asia, democracy was neither the vehicle of capitalism, nor was capitalism facilitated by democracy.

Prominent Asian cities are thus precedents, subject to citation in Phnom Penh — a condition which surfaced constantly in interviews I conducted with Korean real estate developers, American venture capitalists, and local Cambodians.¹¹⁹ In these accounts, Cambodia occupies a place on a continuum of Asian economic development, a position that predicts the promise of the city’s future. In essence, then, while the comparison between contemporary Cambodia and Vietnam in the 1990s, Thailand in the 1980s, and South Korea in the 1970s evades the burden of history, it exudes a productive and transversal appeal in practices and imaginations of convergence and the possibility of building a destroyed city anew.

Implicit in such practices are narratives of high returns, not only through the elite capture of land, but the promise of 100 percent profits and 60 percent rates of return. Such claims, subjective as they may be, soon become absorbed by the myths of rentier wealth, making it difficult to distill fact from fiction. Predictions of potential wealth are also validated by the presence of multinational firms, which drive up the price of property because they represent a sign of stability. Yet the metaphor driving Phnom Penh’s current growth is one that captures both the political economy of Asian urbanism and helps solicit consensus around the inevitability of growth that is both aspirational and inspirational. Cambodia’s economy and Phnom Penh’s urban growth are thus positioned within evolutionary and linear time, where development will unfold under the auspices of progress as the city of ruin is remade for the future.



FIGURE 12. *A view of the city with Mao Tse Toung Boulevard center. Photo by Marie Seng.*

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