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The atomization of heritage politics in post-colonial cities: The case of Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the politics of heritage in urban Cambodia. Focusing on the capital, Phnom Penh, we argue that urban heritage is shaped at the intersection of global doctrines and professional knowledge, socioeconomic strategies at the national and local scales, real estate developments, and contextual institutional practices. We propose the concept "atomization of heritage politics" to explain the fragmentary and tentacular power relations that determine how built heritage is managed or destroyed. Drawing on heritage literature on Southeast Asian cities, we first argue that academic writers underestimate the role of land issues and localized power relations in shaping urban heritage politics. We contextualize the rise of heritage concerns in Cambodia. Since colonial times heritage strategies have focused on the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Angkor, with urban heritage being of only peripheral concern. Second, we explain how proposals made by international development partners for an overall heritage policy failed, as they conflicted with the rationality of land and power relations, leaving foreign consultants to renegotiate their position in Cambodian politics. Finally, we explore two case studies—the National Stadium and the Renakse Hotel—at the center of virulent, long-lasting political clashes between various forces that took root during the reconstruction of the Cambodian state in the 1980s and 1990s. Together with powerful individuals, families, and companies, the competition and tactical alliances between these forces shape the contested politics of urban heritage in the Cambodian capital.

Keywords

Heritage, Asia, urban, power, politics

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Introduction

Over the last 15 years, professionals and scholars interested in the architectural history of Phnom Penh have frequently called for preservation of the urban heritage of the Cambodian capital, but warned that time is running out due to rapid urban development (Osborne, 2008). The local intelligentsia, too—the new generation of Cambodian-educated urban planners, architects, artists, academics, and municipal employees—have voiced support for the preservation of urban heritage. Whenever a new, potentially disruptive urban development project is announced, jokes start to circulate on social networks, and the official tourist slogan "Cambodia, Kingdom of Wonder" becomes "Cambodia, Kingdom of Wonder Why." Indeed, Phnom Penh's urban spaces have evolved rapidly since the end of the 1980s. Colonial and postcolonial buildings have been replaced by villas in an eclectic range of European architectural styles. Major real estate projects springing up all over the city, along with the transformation of the old center, the sale of state properties to developers, and the construction of skyscrapers, condominiums, and malls, have gone hand in hand with the mass destruction of urban heritage.

This state of affairs leaves little room for conservation of the past. Notwithstanding the establishment, in the early 1990s, of an institutional and legal framework for heritage conservation, a highly controversial political situation has impeded the establishment of an overall heritage policy for the city that would establish general conservation areas and regulations. The lack of an urban heritage policy does not mean that urban heritage is not a key issue in Phnom Penh's contemporary development. Conservation practices proliferate, driven by diverse rationalities. We call this phenomenon the "atomization of heritage politics." The word "atomization" is used in English in sociological theory to denote the individualization of interests in modern societies, often shaped by economic strategies of survival and enrichment. Here, we use it to refer to the proliferation of conservation practices guided by specific individual objectives and rationalities. Atomization is shaped at the intersection of global heritage doctrines and professional knowledge, socioeconomic strategies at national and local levels, privately driven real estate development, and contextual institutional practices developed in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge period.

Neoliberalism is one of the factors—but not the only one—that triggers the atomization of heritage politics. In many other neoliberal contexts, heritage policies are involved in encompassing governmental strategies' that aim to improve the attractiveness and the international ranking of cities, attract foreign direct investments, and promote the commodification of culture and heritage. In these cases, the public and the private sector reach consensus on the commercial reconversion of historical buildings and districts. Central historic locations are coveted by the most powerful ones who are often favored by informal negotiations, and this may bring to gentrification and accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few. The State devolves a part of its authority to « new agencies and coalition of agencies, joint partnerships, public–private alliances, global–local or multi-scalar assemblages of NGOs, international authorities, and transnational agencies » (Coombe, 2013: 379). However, governmental actors can use heritage policies to strategically retrieve a certain amount of power, or to punish abuses. Heritage policies go hand in hand with the production of discourses on the social and economic role of heritage, that foster the construction of national identities.

Differently from neoliberal heritage policies however, the atomization of heritage politics does not rely on "authorized heritage discourses" (Smith, 2006) and State apparatuses. The

absence of an overall policy allows for constant readjustments of conservation (or destruction) practices to fit with individual and clanic tactics. Historic buildings and areas are used as instruments to increase personal or group's wealth, prestige, and power. At first glance, atomized heritage practices may appear disconnected because they do not fall under the umbrella of a coherent heritage policy. We argue instead that they all participate in shaping urban heritage approaches because they create the specific conditions under which the local reception of international heritage models takes place in post-colonial cities. Atomization is triggered by the importance of land-driven development and urban projects, and historically shaped power relations between politico-economic elites. It can be used as a heuristic model to examine heritage approaches in those countries where neoliberalism is associated with a neopatrimonial and nepotist organization of State apparatuses. It contributes to break "down the image of government as the preserve of a monolithic state operating as a singular source of power" (Li, 2007: 2) and allows us to consider governmental interventions in the field of heritage as the result of assemblages of different forms of knowledge, value judgment, political and economic strategies, social relationships, and authorities (Coombe, 2013; Li, 2007).

In the first part of the paper, we draw on literature in the field of heritage studies. We argue that Phnom Penh reflects broader trends in the professional heritage sector in Southeast Asia and the global South, in which heritage is viewed as a technical field of planning aloof from political matters. In the second part of the paper, we examine three main processes that have led to the atomization of heritage politics. We describe the failed attempts by international agencies and experts to establish heritage policy in Phnom Penh since the early 1990s, and the scaling down of their ambitions to the conservation of symbolically significant buildings. Drawing on two case studies, of the National Stadium (a building dating from the 1960s) and the colonial-era Renakse Hotel, the third part of the paper shows that decisions about historic conservation rely on the outcomes of power struggles over specific buildings. The two examples reflect broader tendencies at work in conservation projects many post-colonial cities, where heritage is used to restrain the frenzy of urban development and as a tool to increase rights-holders' social power and status. In this sense, political and social elites re-territorialize heritage values through the prism of local power games.

This paper is the result of a long-term research collaboration between the two co-authors, who have worked on contemporary urban development in Cambodia for the last 10–12 years. We draw on several methods and sources of investigation: firstly, field observations on the dynamics of heritage conservation and destruction in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, gathered between 2006 and 2015; secondly, the analysis of official documents by international donors and consultants collected in government offices and international organization headquarters; thirdly, more than 60 interviews with officers, architects, developers, inhabitants, and heritage organizations, carried out between 2007 and 2012 in the pursuit of our research. In addition, 20 interviews with professionals, including Cambodian public officers, architects, and heritage experts were carried out in 2013 and 2015 specifically for the purposes of this paper: the topics discussed revolved around heritage policies, the Cambodian legal framework, the ins and outs of conflicts over conservation and development projects, as well as heritage perceptions and discourse in order to respect the fourthly, systematic analysis of articles in the two main Cambodian English newspapers (the *Phnom Penh Post* and *Cambodia Daily*) during the period 2013–2016 was used to cross-check the reliability of the information provided by our informants.

Reframing Phnom Penh's heritage politics in the international scene

Research on Phnom Penh's vanishing urban heritage remains scarce. Scholars have typically focused on the politics of heritage at Angkor, the archaeological site of the ancient Khmer capitals between the 9th- and 15th-centuries, which was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992 (Esposito, 2018b; Miura, 2011; Winter, 2008). Literature and expert reports on Phnom Penh mainly deal with the development of a new metropolis (Percival and Waley, 2012; Shatkin, 1998), environmental issues (Biswas and Tortajada, 2010), the politics of land (Carrier, 2007), social justice (Simone, 2008), and contemporary real estate development (Fauveaud, 2015). Authors examining the politics of the past have drawn attention to the trauma inflicted by the dictatorial regime of the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979), analyzing the transformation of its remnants, such as Tuol Sleng prison and the Choeung Ek execution area, into museums and memorials (Williams, 2004). Others have addressed the issue of investment or the lack of planning in Phnom Penh, which threatens the survival of its historic districts (Chapman, 2002).

The literature is rife, however, with studies of the politics of heritage in Southeast Asia more broadly. As a result of direct transfer and indirect cultural influences, the trajectory of heritage concerns in former European colonies in Southeast Asia followed a similar path to that in Europe proper. In the 19th-century, European powers exported the notion of the historic monument to their colonies, as well as legislation and institutions aimed at these monuments' conservation (Bloembergen and Eickhoff, 2011; Sengupta, 2015). They laid the ground for the establishment of overall policies protecting all historic monuments recognized as such.

From the 1970s onward, Southeast Asian economic and political capitals underwent intense urban development triggered by national and international investment, which threatened the conservation of their historic fabric (Askew and Logan, 1994; Logan, 2002). This led between the 1980s and the 2000s to the expansion of the notion of heritage to historic districts in some Southeast Asian countries, including Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. In following this path, Southeast Asian governments were influenced by the philosophy of international donors and development organizations. These actors aspired to restore the "true value" of historic centers in developing countries as measured on the basis of historic and artistic values (Steinberg, 1996). Often disconnected from the needs of present-day inhabitants (Grabar, 1993), states in the Global South arbitrarily imposed selective heritage policies that ignored local perceptions of history, tradition, and socioeconomic development (Abu-Khafajah et al., 2015; Fawaz, 2006). More specifically in Southeast Asia, these policies refashioned historic centers by giving priority to the elitist visions of national identity (Yeoh and Huang, 1996) used to foster tourism, national legitimacy (Worden, 2001), and international recognition (Askew, 1996).

Since the 1990s, urban heritage has been drawn into strategies of economic development through city-based cultural tourism. These strategies have been a priority for secondary cities such as Luang Prabang (Laos), Hué and Hoi An (Vietnam), and Malacca and George Town (Malaysia), which received the UNESCO World Heritage label. The World Heritage List, established by the UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage of 1972, normalized the use of homogeneous Western-based criteria and standards for local heritage (Labadi, 2013; Meskell, 2002). Nation states, in turn, have often complied with these standards because they saw UNESCO labels as "tickets" to international recognition and motors of tourism growth. Such heritage centers have been the object of ambitious redevelopment programs that capitalize on heritage to enhance urban tourism and international appeal.

In the case of Southeast Asian metropolises such as Jakarta, Manila, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore, national and municipal strategies have prioritized development and modernization over international heritage recognition. However, development programs have used heritage as an important source of tourist appeal, embracing the UNESCO idea that heritage can be a source of economic benefit for all. In these Southeast Asian metropolises, heritage policies have focused more narrowly on specific architectural landmarks and urban areas that are seen as embodying national identity and are targeted for international tourism (Esposito, 2018a).

In Cambodia, cities have not (yet) become the object of the expansion of heritage concerns from the single monument to urban areas. From colonial to present times, the site of Angkor has monopolized the Cambodian national construction of heritage. It has also become the main source of pride and sentimental attachment for the Cambodian population (Winter, 2007). UNESCO played a fundamental role in establishing a dominant approach to heritage conservation at Angkor (Peycam, 2010), as in other postcolonial countries that retained relationships of cultural, diplomatic, and economic dependence on the Western world. In 1992, UNESCO listed Angkor as a World Heritage Site "in danger" because Cambodia had only just come out of war and foreign occupation and lacked the basic institutional tools for heritage conservation. In Cambodia, foreign influence in the heritage field did not go beyond the field of archaeological conservation. With international assistance playing a key role in the conservation of the Angkor archaeological park, UNESCO and its French partners made several attempts to establish an overall heritage policy for Phnom Penh. However, all of them failed.

Literature on Phnom Penh reflects broader trends at work in academic and expert knowledge in Southeast Asia and the global South. Heritage literature written by non-Southeast Asian academics has largely contributed to develop a simplistic view of power relations, which sees the state as a monolithic structure operating on the basis of its inheritance of colonial cultural and political legacies. Further, this literature has mainly focused on present-day problems, specifically the inclusiveness of heritage policies and the fairness of heritage management systems to local populations. Contestation and disputes have largely been attributed to shortsighted policies and inefficient planning. Such judgmental and critical perspectives reinforce the opposition between Western-based heritage models and local Southeast Asian urban realities.[1]

Since the beginning of the 1990s, UNESCO's "anthropological turn" has enhanced cultural diversity, indigenous culture, and rights. Expert knowledge widely accepted that conservation approaches should draw on local practices, which are likely to be more authentic and original. However, positive perceptions associated with "the local" have often failed to acknowledge the complexity of locally based political games that influence heritage selection and management. Moreover, although the goal was to develop conservation approaches that would include perspectives from the global South, UNESCO's anthropological turn has mainly been triggered by Western actors (Gfeller, 2015).

Similarly, expert reports on Phnom Penh reflect a commonplace of the professional heritage sector, which attributes neglect of preservation to lack of public awareness and institutional weakness. It is assumed that the problem could be solved by increasing institutional resources and educating local bureaucrats about internationally shared heritage values. This literature is characterized by negative perceptions of urban modernization and nostalgic tales about disappearing urban heritage. To account for the lack of urban heritage policies, it typically relies on depoliticized evaluations of institutional malfunctions. Yet these evaluations consider heritage as a "technical" field of planning aloof from political matters, one that only needs to be strengthened through the improvement of local capacities. The belief in

weak local capacities still tends to replicate a colonial paradigm according to which local actors need to be educated and trained. However, the case of Phnom Penh reveals that contemporary power relations at the national and local levels cannot be fully understood without taking into account the institutional history of Cambodia since the fall of the Khmer Rouge. Based on the case of Phnom Penh, we argue that the concept of atomization provides a sounder analysis of the constellations of local power, one that can deepen our insight into the politics of heritage.

The atomization of heritage approaches

Three sources of atomization

Three sociocultural processes have largely contributed to the atomization of heritage politics in urban Cambodia: the construction of negative perceptions of the historic urban fabric; the hasty appropriation of heritage law in line with UNESCO demands for Angkor; and the liberalization of the Cambodian economy.

From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge emptied the cities of their inhabitants and forced them to live and work in the countryside. In just four years, more than 1.7 million people died from starvation, poor hygiene conditions, and summary executions. Unconcerned by heritage conservation, the Khmer Rouge did little to prevent the pillage and decay of Angkor temples. With cities populated only by public administrators (Carrier, 2007), buildings and public spaces were left to deteriorate. After the Vietnamese army defeated the Khmer Rouge in 1979, Cambodians returned to Phnom Penh and occupied houses and plots of land that had been abandoned. Many did not hail from Phnom Penh. The large majority of those who did were unable to recover their former homes (Fauveaud, 2015). A considerable part of the population had to settle for obsolete buildings. They thus tended to associate inherited buildings with memories of disenfranchisement, loss, and poverty (Clément-Charpentier, 2008).

Between 1979 and 1989, the Cambodian–Vietnamese administration focused on the reconstruction of basic infrastructure and services. Little was done in the conservation field, except for the maintenance of the sites where the Khmer Rouge committed atrocities (Chandler, 1999) and several failed attempts to designate Angkor as a demilitarized zone. In 1991, the Paris Agreements saw the stationing in Cambodia of a peacekeeping mission supervised by the United Nations, followed by the organization of free general elections in 1993. Cambodia was targeted for major development projects conducted by international NGOs and bilateral or multilateral agencies, some focusing on the urban development of Phnom Penh. In 1992, UNESCO listed Angkor as a World Heritage Site "in danger." Since then, international partners have flocked to sponsor conservation projects in the archaeological park.

To have Angkor removed from the endangered list, Cambodia committed to complying with a series of UNESCO demands. One was to establish a legislative apparatus for heritage conservation. The Cambodian Constitution of 1993 stated that any offenses affecting cultural artistic heritage shall be punishable (art. 70) and that the perimeters of national heritage sites shall be considered "neutral zones" where military activity is forbidden (art. 71). The Law on Land Management, Urban Planning, and Constructions of 1994 stipulated that master plans for special regions should "protect the patrimony and the Environment" (art. 5). Further, "special provisions" should be made for "protecting and promoting the value of resort places or of any immobile objects which shall provide advantages in archeology, history, culture, beauty or technique" (art. 10). Prior to the destruction of any existing

building, a demolition permit must be obtained from the relevant authorities (art. 22). According to the Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage of 1996, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts is officially in charge of protecting heritage spaces and buildings. However, the decree implementing this law has never been signed, and the ministry's freedom to take concrete steps to promote heritage conservation remains limited.

As Cambodian heritage legislation was shaped on the basis of international principles that include urban heritage, it can potentially be applied to the conservation of historic cities. However, Cambodian institutions did not think through the issues affecting urban heritage. They adopted legislation with the primary objective of safeguarding Angkor. For the same reason, Cambodian institutions willingly endorsed the transfer of international knowledge about archaeological conservation and management planning that was applied in the international program for safeguarding Angkor (Esposito, 2018b), but were resistant to the importation of international knowledge about urban heritage.

Under pressure from regional and international organizations, Cambodia rapidly caught up with the general liberalization of neighboring countries and the broader region from which it had been suddenly cut off between 1975 and 1989 (Goldblum, 2012). Following forced collectivization during the Khmer Rouge era, private property ownership was reintroduced in 1989 and public companies began to be privatized (Népote and de Vienne, 1993), a process that accelerated in the first part of the 1990s, notably during the UN peacekeeping operation from 1991 to 1993 (Gerles, 2008). The new constitution adopted in 1993 introduced a market economy, and multiple laws passed in 1994 and 1995 improved the conditions for local and foreign investors. Cambodia joined ASEAN in 1999 and the World Trade Organization in 2004. This unbridled economic liberalization has been accompanied by macroeconomic reforms and institutional reorganization (decentralization programs and the reorganization of regional administration and management since 2001).

During these years, Phnom Penh developed as the main hub for national and international investment in manufacturing, services, and real estate. It has come to symbolize the promise of a bright (i.e. wealthier) urban future in the eyes not only of profit-seeking developers, but also of impoverished urban residents who aspire to improve their living conditions. At the same time, the role of Angkor as one of the most important archaeological sites in the world exacerbated a double-edged discourse that polarized heritage narratives about Angkor one the one hand and modernization and development narratives in Phnom Penh on the other.

These three processes prevented collective awareness of heritage and institutional concern from taking root in contemporary society. Under these conditions, overall approaches to heritage conservation could not have gained enough social and political support to be successfully implemented in the Cambodian capital.

The failure of French-led proposals for a heritage policy

In the early 1990s, foreign experts proposed the development of an overall heritage approach for Phnom Penh. As in other countries of the global South, this approach was fostered by international organizations and bilateral cooperation agencies. It was based on a developmental idea of the state as an entity that ought to be able to implement an urban heritage policy, that is to say a series of comprehensive regulations and planning measures to be implemented in urban historic districts. French actors played a prominent role in the definition of this approach. Drawing on a tradition of knowledge production and conservation of Cambodian ancient heritage, established since colonial times (Peycam, 2010), technical and financial assistance for Phnom Penh's urban heritage formed part of the renewal of cultural

and diplomatic ties in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge period. Between 1993 and 1996, the French Ministry of Culture sponsored an inventory of 615 architectural structures, complexes, and sites, including a total of 1962 buildings, by the Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme (Paris Urbanism Agency, APUR) (Starkman, 1997). Fact sheets in both French and Khmer included location maps, drawings, and information about land registration. In addition, experts provided comprehensive descriptions that would allow the buildings to be categorized based on their heritage value in accordance with western European professional standards of architectural heritage, including historic, architectural, and artistic qualities believed to be intrinsic to buildings and spaces and therefore not dependent on subjective value-judgments. The APUR ultimately suggested that 202 "priority buildings" be listed according to the 1996 heritage law (Starkman, 1997). However, the inventory did not provide for their conversion to profit-making functions: in line with heritage policies implemented in neighboring Southeast Asian cities during the same years, the inventory focused on heritage value while neglecting the priorities of residents. It thus had little appeal for a growing urban population who viewed the urban fabric as a site of opportunity where they could profit from the commercialization of real estate (Fauveaud, 2015).

Although the inventory did not end up being used for heritage listing, the Phnom Penh Master Plan, designed by the French government in collaboration with the Phnom Penh Municipality (MPP), reproduced this prescriptive approach to heritage conservation.[2] Following the APUR's recommendations, the municipality examined the deterioration of heritage buildings in an effort to update the inventory, reporting that less than 10 percent of the inventoried buildings were destroyed between 1996 and 2004 (Interview with Government Officials_08, 2013) and 30 percent to 40 percent during the following decade (Interview with Government Officials_08, 2013). Since 2005, the destruction of urban heritage has accelerated due to the real-estate boom fostered by the stabilization of the national political situation.[3] The Master Plan stated that the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts should identify heritage buildings and sites in the municipality to be protected in line with the 1996 heritage law. Several further reports added that the municipality should develop a tourism-based urban heritage policy in order to increase local revenues (inter alia De Brix and Leleu, 2005). Although more than two million tourists visited Phnom Penh in 2015 (Runcie, 2015), they generally stay in the capital for just a few days and only visit the major sights (the Royal Palace, the National Museum, and the Vat Phnom). The latest version of the white paper (Phnom Penh Municipality and the French Embassy in Cambodia, 2010) and accompanying report both focused on the beautification of historic areas, public parks, and natural sites such as riverbanks, which are viewed as major economic assets. More specifically, these documents recommended the conservation of at least 25 buildings from pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial times, but no implementing measures have resulted.

Scaling down urban heritage to consensual objects

Urban heritage conservation led by French actors has remained limited to sporadic interventions and depends on the actors and sites involved. In the late 2000s, French partners sponsored the establishment of the Centre du Patrimoine (Heritage Center) as a public institution controlled by the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. The Center manages two sub-projects: the Mission du Patrimoine (Heritage Mission) since 2005, and the Regional Center for the Training of Students and Experts in Heritage since 2007. The Mission du Patrimoine focused on "remarkable architectural styles," represented by colonial buildings, and the New Khmer Architecture, which blends elements from the

international Modern Movement with references to Angkor temples and ordinary Cambodian houses (Ross and Collins, 2006).

Faced with the failure of general heritage policies, French donors and experts have scaled down their ambitions to the restoration of remarkable buildings, such as the National Museum, the National Library, the Phsar Thmey market, and the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, co-founded by the prominent filmmaker Rithy Panh. Their comprehensive heritage vision was fragmented into multiple small-scale conservation projects, on which French actors were able to come to an agreement with their local counterparts. These agreements were successful because the conservation of the buildings in question was in the interest of the Cambodians for various reasons: for instance, the National Museum is a major tourist spot and the Phsar Thmey a major market. The sites thus escaped being the object of competition among actors who struggle to control land. More broadly, these projects influence the perceptions of officials, local institutions, and the intelligentsia with respect to urban heritage (Interview with Government Official_01, 2015; Interview with Government Official 02_2015).

Other buildings, objects, and spaces were targeted by conservation projects entirely sponsored by national funds, including the Royal Palace, other urban markets, and iconic public spaces such as Wat Phnom Hill and the esplanade in front of the Independence Monument.[4] The pagodas also generally escape the rationale that land should be profitable as, according to the 2001 Land Law, they are owned by religious communities. The existence of consensual urban heritage objects is a revealing aspect of the atomization of heritage politics. They show that Cambodian institutional actors are indeed concerned by heritage conservation. Conservation projects may appear disconnected, but they comply with two conditions: the conserved object has a vital urban function—economic or symbolic—and/or it represents one of the two pillars of Cambodian identity, namely monarchy and the Buddhist religion. Apart from these objects, heritage conservation often implies contestation and disputes when public institutions are involved as owners. In the cases discussed below, the contested privatization of public urban sites leads to the convergence of conflicting interests and objectives with respect to architectural and urban heritage.

Privatization of heritage as contested territorialization

The neo-liberalization endorsed by international organizations since the 1990s and the strategies of Cambodian elites largely contribute to the atomization of heritage politics. The built heritage is indeed involved in broader urban dynamics triggered by strategies of capital accumulation through land speculation (Bafoil, 2014; Hughes, 2003; Springer, 2015). The state's neopatrimonial organization and the fast development of the real-estate sector (Fauveaud, 2014) exacerbate accumulation by dispossession and engender land conflicts and forced evictions (Fauveaud, 2016a; Hughes, 2008). In this situation, urban heritage serves as a source of enrichment for families, clans, and tycoons who control public institutions or have privileged access to heritage sites. It also serves as a lever for the empowerment of local administrations and "land-based" urban elites (Fauveaud, 2016b). These two interconnected processes determine how heritage concerns play a role in urban visions, narratives, and projects. Local government institutions pursue two main strategies that allow them to profit financially from the exploitation of state property. First, they sell public[5] and private properties belonging to the state. Second, they grant long-term concessions on state properties to individuals, companies, and joint ventures, allowing the families and clans involved in these transactions to manage formerly public properties as their own and therefore to increase their power in urban space.

However, one should not view the privatization of public buildings and land as the only consequence of unilateral land-grabbing strategies by high-ranking officials and the corruption and impunity that work to their advantage. The sale and redevelopment of public properties also results from multilateral power struggles between clans and individuals, institutions, and public, private, and international stakeholders. In other words, rather than top-down, unilateral profit-seeking strategies, an analysis of the privatization of inherited buildings and spaces reveals how elites' power and societal visions territorialize heritage values in the context of disputes over the control of central urban locations. Territorialization goes beyond short-term personal aspirations to enrichment. It is a long-term process that involves control of land resources as a means to power for powerful clans, who defend what they perceive as a natural right to use, destroy, or sell urban legacies. Territorialization processes reveal the formation of interest groups and long-term political conflicts exacerbated by disputes over conservation issues.

The case studies presented in the following pages illustrate how decision-making concerning the conservation of two architectural landmarks in Phnom Penh—the National Stadium and the Renakse Hotel—depends less on the assessment of heritage values than on territorialization processes involving alliances and conflicts between political actors, developers, and owners.

The National Stadium: Heritage as a tacit argument against urban change

The recent construction of a large-scale real-estate project at the northern end of the National Stadium complex (see fig. 1) involves the two main political factions: the Royalist Party FUNCINPEC, originally led by the prince and former prime minister Norodom Ranariddh, and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the leading Cambodian political organization. Headed by the prime minister Hun Sen, who has maintained a parliamentary majority ever since the first general elections in 1993, the CPP is often viewed as acting less as a political party and more as a public institution and legitimate owner of a number of properties in Phnom Penh.

The National Stadium replaced the hippodrome built during the French Protectorate. It was financed through the national budget of the postcolonial Cambodian state and inaugurated in 1964. The stadium was designed by Cambodian architect Vann Molyvann, who was commissioned by the head of state Norodom Sihanouk and assisted by several international architects and engineers. The stadium complex is considered a prototypical expression of the architectural movement now known as "Modern Khmer." It was built on a 40-hectare plot, with the main indoor stadium surrounded by various open-air facilities. In Sihanouk's urban development strategy, the stadium served as a landmark promoting urban expansion to the west that involved the construction of new neighborhoods. The stadium soon came to be considered Molyvann's "masterpiece" (Ross and Collins, 2006). Over the last 50 years, it has been used not only as a sports arena but also as a political space by Sihanouk, the Khmer Rouge, and the contemporary Cambodian government, as well as a public space for local residents, young people, and families, who still gather there to relax or exercise. Many inhabitants today see the stadium as a secondary urban center thanks to the plethora of markets, craft-working districts, boulevards, and bus and taxi stations located in its vicinity.

Given the strategic location of the National Stadium, developers have coveted the land since the mid-1990s. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MEYS), established in 1995, is the official owner of the plot and responsible for the maintenance and financial management of the stadium. Between 1995 and 2004, the MEYS was controlled by

Figure 1. The National Stadium and the Olympia City project under construction in 2015 in the background.
source: Fauveaud, 2015.

FUNCINPEC. In the early 2000s, a Taiwanese company, Yuanta Construction and Engineering Co., expressed an interest in developing the land surrounding the indoor stadium. In exchange, it offered to cover the costs of upgrading and maintaining the main building. Although Chea Sophara, governor of the MPP from 1998 to 2003,[6] alternately supported and opposed the project, the MPP was effectively sidelined in the negotiations. The talks took place between the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning, and Construction (MLMUPC), which according to the 2001 Land Law must approve every development project involving an area of more than 3000 square meters, and high-ranking officials of the CPP. As head of the CPP, Hun Sen accused Norodom Ranariddh of having entered into a contract in 1995 with a different private company belonging to his family to renovate the stadium and develop the surrounding areas.

The negotiations between public institutions and government officials did not succeed for almost 10 years, although rumors circulated regularly about the sale of the stadium and even its impending demolition and replacement with a new facility located elsewhere. In the late 2000s, the Overseas Cambodia Investment Corporation (OCIC)[7] acquired a plot of almost four hectares located in the northern part of the stadium precinct. There it began to build "Olympia City," a new development including 13 high rise buildings, a car park, a shopping mall, a business center, and several plazas, set to cover a total of 11.5 hectares by the end of 2017. The OCIC's owner, Pung Kheav Se, is one of the most influential tycoons in Cambodia, president of the powerful Sino-Khmer association since January 2017 and a close economic advisor of Hun Sen. The actors involved and the details of the deal between

the state and the OCIC remain unknown. The OCIC, the CPP, the MLMUPC, and the MEYS (taken over by the CPP in 2004) seem to have been the main beneficiaries (Interview with Government Officials_01, 2015), while the MPP was excluded and its technical advisors contested the development (Interview with Government Officials_02, 2015).

Rather than a centralized government-controlled strategy determining the future of this public site, it was thus determined by a convergence of interests between powerful individuals and groups. While it appears that the conservation of the stadium was never much of a priority—indeed, the lack of regular maintenance could one day compromise its stability—its demolition, alternately predicted and denied, has not (yet) come to fruition in spite of the revenues likely to flow from the exploitation of the land on which it is located.

Although the stadium's heritage value has never been explicitly raised to tilt the balance in favor of conservation, its retention reveals how heritage is used as a tacit argument that restrains the frenzy of urban redevelopment. The apparently unbridled frenzy has its limits: the beneficiaries were indeed allowed to commercialize portions of the land that made up part of the stadium's complex, but not to destroy the stadium itself. Its cultural importance is intertwined with and negotiated on the basis of the rationality of land profitability. The new development cuts into the space of the architectural complex but also enhances its aura, with its name, Olympia, intended to tap into an elite identity shared with the stadium. By being grafted onto a highly symbolic urban space, the new development enjoys prestige by association and thus stands out from the many other developments of this kind springing up all over the rapidly developing Cambodian capital.

The Renakse Hotel: Heritage as a tool of social power

The sale of private state property has become a bone of contention within the government and between high-ranking officials since the 2000s. In 2012, Hun Sen publicly reprimanded two ministers who were attempting to sell off notable public buildings even as he himself was involved in similar transactions (Titthara, 2012). An analysis of the interplay between actors and the intricate history of public property management since the 1980s can complement our understanding of the mass privatization of state properties, which is facilitated by neoliberal policies and neo-patrimonialism. To this end, the Renakse Hotel serves as a useful case study (see fig. 2).

The Renakse is a colonial house built at the beginning of the 20th-century to accommodate the Cambodian courts during the French Protectorate (Interview with a Heritage Specialist_07, 2015). After Phnom Penh was occupied by the Vietnamese in 1979, it became the temporary headquarters of the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (KUFNS), an organization founded in 1978 by Khmer Rouge opponents of Democratic Kampuchea with Vietnamese assistance. This was the precursor to the Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), which in turn became the CCP in 1991. In the early 1980s, the Renakse served as a state hotel that hosted regional and international experts and officials (Carrier, 2007: 228), while maintaining its function as part of the headquarters of the political party-to-be. With the departure of the Vietnamese administration in 1989, the wife of a colleague of the politician Chea Sim,[8] herself an employee of the Cambodian government, obtained a short-term lease from the KPRP to manage the building. During this time it was converted into a private hotel and mainly patronized by officials, foreign delegations, and the employees of international institutions (Mengleng and Becker, 2009). As of the early 1990s, it also housed the National Committee for Organizing National and International Festivals (NCONIF).

Figure 2. The abandoned Renakse Hotel in 2018 located in front of the Royal Palace.

Having renewed the contract twice more, the leaseholder was authorized to manage the hotel until 2015 (Mengleng, 2008). However, a municipal ordinance in 2009 saw it suddenly shut down, apparently on the grounds of a municipal directive from the Land Management, Urban Planning, and Construction Department indicating that potentially dangerous buildings more than a century old must be closed. The ordinance transferred the lease to the company Alexan Inc., which proposed to demolish the Renakse to make way for a new housing project (Titthara, 2008). Alexan Inc.'s owner, journalists soon revealed, was married to the nephew of the deputy director of the municipal court, who issued the order to close the hotel (Mengleng and Becker, 2009). At the same time, an expert report drawn up by the EFEO stated that historical documents demonstrated that the hotel had been built during the 1920s, and was therefore less than 100 years old (Interview with a Heritage Specialist_03, 2013). The building thus did not fall under the municipal law stipulating that decaying, century-old buildings must be shut down. The request for EFEO expertise shows that French professionals are given room to express their opinions by national and local institutions. However, even if public institutions consider them the bearers of valuable cultural capital with respect to heritage, EFEO foreign experts are only able to make use of this capital when it serves broader sociopolitical and economic ends.

The former leaseholder was offered US$200,000 in compensation, which she declined. It is not clear who offered this compensation, however, and the identity of the official public owner of the building remains equally unclear. According to a public statement of leaseholdership, the official owner is the CPP. However, the compensation may have been offered by the Ministry of Cult and Religion (MOCAR), whose headquarters have been

located near the Renakse since 1979 (Carrier, 2007: 223). A CPP lawyer was quoted by the press as suggesting that either the CPP or the MOCAR could make the payment (Titthara, 2008), and in 2008 the leaseholder was negotiating with both.

Although she contested the decision before the Municipal Court and the Appeals Court in 2009, and finally the Supreme Court in 2010, the former leaseholder's case was repeatedly dismissed. In 2010, the CPP announced that the land adjacent to the Renakse had been sold to the Pheapimex Company, which also appeared to be the new Renakse leaseholder. The official in charge of the lease transfer at the MOCAR was Minister Min Khin, who was well acquainted with land issues in the area of the Royal Palace, having formerly worked for the Royal Palace Ministry during the 1980s and later for the NCONIF. Pheapimex is one of the CPP's main financial backers. Owned by the prominent couple Lao Meng Khin (a CPP senator) and Choeung Sopheap (the company's managing director), Pheapimex has been involved in several real estate disputes in Phnom Penh and elsewhere (Global Witness, 2007).

In spite of the lease transfer, as of 2017 the hotel remains closed and the building has started to collapse. As revealed by local newspapers, high-ranking officials and the institutions involved in the case disagreed on how to solve the conflict, which also aroused opposition among top politicians (Mengleng and Becker, 2009). For his part, the UNESCO head representative publicly called for the preservation of the building and expressed concerns about a new municipal law that may pave the way for the demolition of numerous buildings on the basis of imprecise assessments of their condition (Interview with a Heritage Specialist_03, 2013). He commissioned the Mission du Patrimoine to review the Renakse situation and subsequently sent the expert report to King Sihamoni (Interview with a Heritage Specialist_07, 2015). The king also asked for a copy of the court decision and expressed his own concern about the privatization of the property (Interview with a Heritage Specialist_03, 2013).

This case provides several insights into the politics of urban heritage. First, it may be that royal discontent with a housing project in the vicinity of the Royal Palace discouraged further action. Following this line of thought, the king may have played a pacifying role in the imbroglio, extending the area of his direct influence to the surroundings of the Royal Palace. As the palace represents the monarchy, it can be considered a consensual object of conservation whose surroundings should also be preserved in order to maintain its integrity. Although it is difficult to locate and access reliable sources of information on land disputes involving the highest spheres of urban politics in Phnom Penh, the fact that royal authorities and the king himself were able to stop two other development projects near the Royal Palace (by accusing developers of not respecting the authorized height limits for buildings) testifies to the fact that the king can directly oppose institutions empowered to officially authorize urban projects. In other words, the monarchy has the ultimate power in applying the law when the drive for profit appears to exceed the acceptable limits set by the pillars of contemporary Cambodian society.

Second, analysts have often seen the privatization of public resources as a consequence of the liberalization of the Cambodian economy in the early 1990s. Yet privatization actually took root during the Vietnamese occupation, when government institutions in particular ministries were responsible for managing substantial plots of land and buildings surrounding their headquarters (Carrier, 2007). Already in those days, therefore, elites and executive officials were benefiting from privileged access to prime land and buildings. Significantly, it seems that the land on which the Renakse Hotel stands is mainly owned by the CPP. However, the participation of MOCAR in the negotiation also suggests that pre-existing ownership conflicts still survive in the contemporary privatization of public property.

Third, the public ownership of inherited buildings, and therefore their urban status, is shrouded in uncertainty. In this case, uncertainty was exploited by private and public actors to create alliances that allowed them to present a united front against the former leaseholder. But alliances are volatile, evolving under the impact of pledges, marriages, and political ascendancy, and this volatility adds another layer of uncertainty to the future of inherited buildings. Even those listed as cultural heritage sites are not guaranteed preservation, despite the fact that Cambodian law ostensibly provides for this. As with the National Stadium, the site of the Renakse Hotel is subject to attempted land grabs by competing institutions. In their capacities as representatives of these institutions, high-ranking officials defend particular interests on territories they perceive as "theirs." Although such maneuvering endangers the survival of the building, it also increases the hotel's importance: in terms of criteria of architectural value it would be assessed as a beautiful colonial house, not a major urban landmark. Its visibility increases in the realm of urban politics, imbuing it with the status of a colonial monument capable of crystallizing a decades-long power struggle between institutions and politicians. Heritage is used to affirm the leaseholder's social power, specifically the ability to oppose fierce resistance to representatives of institutions and powerful investors.

Conclusion

Drawing on the case of Phnom Penh, this article argues that local power relations and the politics of land play an important part in shaping conservation approaches in an emerging city from the global South. These aspects have been largely overlooked by heritage literature on postcolonial countries, which has mainly focused on the critique of heritage policies designed by national governments and international institutions.

We have argued that neo-liberalism, land-driven urban development, and the territorialization of long-term power relations have triggered the "atomization of heritage politics." Firstly, we have identified the historical factors that prepared this atomization, including the city's repopulation after the Khmer Rouge "urbicide," the role of UNESCO, the importance of Angkor in shaping national heritage priorities, France's technical and financial support, as well as successful local conservation practices. Secondly, we have argued that the atomization of heritage politics is entangled with the neo-patrimonial organization of Cambodian institutions, the economic liberalization of the country, and the emergence of land-based elites since the 1980s.

The two case studies show that the rationality of property development contributes not only to heritage destruction but also to the elaboration of new approaches to heritage itself. Heritage conservation becomes possible when various actors coalesce around symbolically significant buildings. When consensus is not reached, privatized heritage becomes a cause of disputes or alliances between actors who are attracted by the high financial value of central locations. Historic buildings serve as sites of struggle in the long-term historical construction of power and social relations. Thus, urban heritage relies on territorialized power relations, because the possession or ownership of highly symbolic urban spaces represent long-term means to increase power for local politico-economic elites and clans.

In this light, the atomization of heritage politics calls for sustained attention to the sociopolitical processes that shape heritage practices from behind the scenes. So far, heritage literature on postcolonial countries has been too much concerned with struggles over conservation questions in which the state, the private sector, and "ordinary citizens" are in disagreement. It has often argued in this literature that inclusive planning approaches to heritage would make conservation more respectful of the plurality of values and worldviews.

The case of Phnom Penh reveals, however, that power relations at the local level are far more complex than the aforementioned tripartite conflict suggests. These power relations have their roots in broader historical processes that contradict the paradigm of postcolonial dependence. Conservation is not only a matter of struggle, but also of underground negotiations and alliances among actors who have a stake both in the private and in the public sector. In this regard, the concept of the atomization of heritage politics is designed to open a new avenue of inquiry, one that examines how heritage conservation takes place within the complex arrangements that constitute urban development, identity politics, and site promotion in postcolonial cities.

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Notes

1. On the other hand, heritage literature written by authors from (and based in) Southeast Asia has largely appropriated international conservation principles. It has widely endorsed a technocratic approach and has rarely engaged with the political nature of heritage. In general, it has narrowed down its scope to a critique of the shortcomings of national laws and management systems, aimed at improving the tools of heritage conservation based on international models.
2. The Master Plan covers two phases, the first lasting from 2001 to 2007 and the second from 2008 to 2010.
3. After the 1998 coup led by Hun Sen, who had shared the role of prime minister with Prince Norodom Ranariddh and his party (the FUNCINPEC) since 1993, the Cambodian People's Party centralized power in its own hands. This bolstered the trust of national and international developers, who subsequently increased their investments in Cambodia, especially in the real estate sector in Phnom Penh and the tourism hub of Siem Reap, the town located on the steps of Angkor.
4. The Independence Monument, designed by internationally renowned architect Vann Molyvann, was built in 1958 to celebrate Cambodia's independence from the French Protectorate.
5. According to the 2001 Land Law, "state public property is inalienable." However, if "public properties lose their public interest use, they can be listed as private properties of the State by law on transferring of state public property to state private property" (art. 16). This rule is often employed tactically by Cambodian institutions, which transfer public facilities from city centers to the urban periphery in order to make a case for reduced public interest. This allows them to commercialize more profitable central urban locations.

6. Chea Sophara is an important figure in the CPP; he previously served as Minister of Rural Development and is currently Senior Minister at the MLMUPC.
7. The OCIC is one of the country's largest real estate developers and a subsidiary of Canadia Bank, a key financial institution in Cambodia.
8. Chea Siem was one of the most influential members of the CPP from the 1980s until his death in 2015.

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