Saving the White Building:

Storytelling and the Production of Space[1]

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"It's not about blueprints, it's about successions; it's not architecture, it's music."

Roberto Unger, (2014)

The White Building soon after completion, 1965

Introduction

The White Building is an apartment complex in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It was built in 1963 as a keystone of the Sihanouk governments' urban social housing scheme. After the fall of Khmer Rouge in 1979, the few surviving artists were called to live in The White Building due to its proximity to the National Theatre in order to re-build Khmer culture (the National Theatre has since been demolished). After decades of no maintenance and ongoing restructuring of the exterior, the White Building is in poor condition. However, behind the fading facade and dilapidated infrastructure there lives a complex community of over three thousand people including artists, musicians, community activists and everyday city dwellers. This paper explores the role of recent projects to document the everyday lives of the Building's inhabitants as both a means of resistance and to enable critical reflexivity among participants. Through the development of a number of initiatives

across a variety of mediums and media platforms – including the very successful Humans of Phnom Penh series, whitebuilding.org and the Sa Sa Art Projects artists' collective based in the building – there is a desire to not only celebrate and document the living memory of this unique community, but to push back against government and property developers' interest in the site. By utilising a Lefebvrian analysis we argue, first, that the dominant discursive acts of the more powerful can be challenged through the expression of the 'lived' and the elevation of everyday life. And, second, we argue that the very perception of the space and the sense of place is (re)produced through these interactions across these new and diverse mediascapes.

The White Building, Phnom Penh, 2012. Photo by Chhon Pisal

Contested Space(s)

Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space* (1991) has been repopularised and is increasingly applied to the study of neoliberalism and, in particular, to what might be termed the production of neoliberal spaces. Although Lefebvre never directly referred to neoliberalism and his focus was largely upon the 'production' of urban spaces, his ideas

have re-emerged as a powerful interpretive analysis of how dominant capitalist practices and ideology are core to the political, social and economic relations that form space. Space, then, is relational – yet common perceptions of space are that it is an abstract notion within which human actions take place. Within this conception, space is simply a "dimension in which matter is located" or it is conceptualised as "a grid in which substantive items are contained" (Agnew, 2011, pp. 316-17; Harvey, 2001, pp. 121-5). The "matter" or the "substantive items" is that which is geometric and locatable within this dimension – or, put more simply: place. (Agnew, 2011). It is a fixed, linear and determinist notion of space (and place) within which interactions take place. Lefebvre overturned these notions, arguing that space "has always been political and strategic" and that it is "filled with ideologies" (1976, pp. 30-1). Moreover, he recognised that scientific method and procedure infiltrates mental space, which, in turn, comes to represent social space. This, Lefebreve quickly pointed out, becomes the "veil of ideology" (1991, p. 106) – and it is behind this veil that the social nature of space is hidden by ideological domination.

For Lefebvre, "(Social) space is a (social) product" (1991, p. 26). In justifying this assertion he posited a dialectical triad consisting of three dimensions: "spatial practice;" "representations of space;" and "representational space." He distilled this further to the "perceived-conceived-lived" (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 33, 40).[2] However, it is the dynamic interrelationship between the dimensions – the push and pull of domination and resistance that gives critical importance to the triad:

1. **Spatial practice** is the *perceived* space where the production (hierarchical organisation of the division of labour, society etc.) and reproduction (bio-physiological relations – sexual relations, family etc.) occurs. Production and social reproduction (Harvey, 1989), which allow for a level of cohesiveness to be maintained (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 33, 38). There is also a connection here with the international political economy of the everyday, where "[h]ow, what, and with whom we spend, save, invest, buy and produce in our ordinary lives shapes markets and the manner in which states intervene." The international political economy is a socially produced space and everyday lives are a part of what constitutes "the global economy in its multiple spatial dimension" (Hobson and Seabrooke 2006, pp. 3-4, 16). The everyday is part of, and belongs to, the production of space (Merrifield 1993, p. 523). However, it is vital when making such claims that agency is not stripped away. Agency can be expressed, but

within the "repressive 'confines'" (Hobson and Seabrooke 2006, p. 15) of the dominant social space. However remote, counter-hegemonic possibilities remain a possibility as is explored below.

2. **Representations of space** is the *conceived* space. Here order and ideology are tied to discursive practices; the "conceptualized space" of technocrats, professionals, scientists and the techno-bureaucracy (Lefebvre 1991; 1976; Merrifield 1993). It is not difficult to bridge to Gramsci's ideas of the role of intellectuals in the production of hegemonic practices (Ekers and Loftus, 2013; Bates, 1975). This is the domain of capital and it plays a dominant role in the production of space (Merrifield, 1993). Here a "pure" scientific and objective space is produced. In the same manner the town planner or architect appropriates scientific knowledge (Lefebvre, 1976), the absorption of neoliberal practices as 'common-sense' means that not only do the planners and architects of governmental institutions appropriate and absorb a similar language, but that an overarching economic ontology shapes and co-constitutes this space through multiple feedback mechanisms. Political and ideological imperatives drive our understanding of space. Ironically space is relational, but this dominant space is *conceived* as abstract, linear and Newtonian. In short a Newtonian-inspired Western scientific economic ontology drives technocratic, administrative and pseudo-scientific discursive acts that define the dominant space (Louth, 2011; 2012).

3. **Representational spaces** are the *lived* spaces of images and symbols (Lefebvre, 1991). Culture, art, writing, philosophy occur here. Lefebvre did not relegate nor consider this space unimportant. Imagination, creativity and symbolism are distinguishable from, but, at the same time, belong to the physical and social space (Merrifield, 1993). It is a dominated space, yet, irrespective of its domination and its dialectical involvement in the production of space (particularly the space of the everyday), there is the capacity for novelty and emancipatory ideas. Lefebvre (1991) noted that this is space of symbols and images "conceals more than it reveals", but still felt strongly "that there are no new ideas without a utopia" (1976, p. 35). This is a thought that indicates that the socially produced 'reality', the expansion and grind of capitalist domination could be overcome or, at the very least, mediated. Indeed, an important spatial

consideration prior to any counter-hegemonic process is knowledge and the development of an alternative common-sense (Gill and Law, 1989).

It is with this conception of socially produced space that we will consider the space and place that is the White Building. At one level there is a totality to the breadth of productive and social forces that are at play (Harvey, 2001) and, importantly, we can understand them as scaled and penetrating into "every aspect of everyday life" (Charnock, 2010, p. 1296). We can see this in the White Building via attempts to redevelop the building, to evict the residents and to the label them as undesirables. This is capitalist accumulation pure and simple; the ideologically dominant form of space empowers "often by violent means" attempts "to reduce … obstacles and resistance" (Lefebvre 1991, p. 49). The current Cambodian experience reveals a process of violent neoliberal accumulation under the guise of clean and order-inducing economic presuppositions. Yet the whole process of producing space is not a neat and linear set of affairs: there is a 'roughness' to the everyday that cannot be wholly subsumed or simply abstracted and reduced into neat economic determinations. Yet this 'roughness', found in the materiality of everyday spatial practices and in the realm of the lived experience, is often ignored or made to fit (violently if need be) with the dominant discourse *on* space. But it is the disjuncture offers opportunities for emancipatory potential. Public protests are representative of a reclaiming of space. Indeed, the emergence of social movements can be considered to be "manifest expressions of deeper, broader, latent dissatisfactions" (Willner quoted in Springer, 2011, p. 46). Quoting Lefebvre, Wilson points out:

> …that abstract representations of space cannot succeed in 'papering over all differences' …, as through the process of their implementation they are confronted by "the materiality of the spatial practices and representational spaces that they have discursively erased, which constitute the grounds for resistance and transformative possibilities. (2011, p. 388)

There is a habit of lionizing the possibility of counter-hegemonic potential from speculative theorising as opposed to the empirical analysis of "the spatial dimensions of hegemony, control, and exploitation" (Grovogui and Leonard, 2008, p. 170). Cambodia is a country undergoing rapid economic transformation, with Phnom Penh a new site for neoliberal expansion. Within this, we explore how emergent forms of expression in a small contested social space have generated a creative community and a grassroots resistance to the dominant ideological practices. The White Building is a site of

resistance where the everyday and the lived experience has not been successfully "papered over", that allows us to respond to one of Lefebvre most pertinent questions:

> Given that abstract space is buttressed by non-critical (positive) knowledge, backed up by a frightening capacity for violence, and maintained by a bureaucracy which has laid hold the gains of capitalism in the ascendant and turned them to its own profit, must we conclude that this space will last forever? (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 52)

Aerial view of the Bassac Riverfront development, c. early 1965. Top left is the White Building. Top right is the triangular Bassac National Theatre (burnt in 1994 and demolished in December 2007). The Grey Building has now been completely transformed and is now unrecognizable as the Phnom Penh Centre. The two long apartment buildings in the bottom left and centre of the image are now used by the Russian Embassy as accommodation for embassy staff and military.

The White Building: From Modernist Dreams to the Khmer Rouge Devastation

To offer some historical context to the main site of investigation: The White Building is an apartment complex in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It was built in 1963 as a keystone of the Sihanouk governments' urban social housing scheme. In post-independence Cambodia during the late 1950s and 1960s, under the leadership of Norodom Sihanouk, the former King and the then Prime Minister, Phnom Penh underwent a tremendous transformation at an unprecedented pace, with an abundance of newly built public infrastructure,

monuments and buildings. Between independence from the French in 1953 and the coup d'etat by the US supported Lon Nol regime in 1970, Phnom Penh's population tripled from 370,000 to one million (Keyes, 1995, p. 300). This massive urban migration prompted an urgent need for a housing solution. In an address to Phnom Penh Governor Tep Phan in 1961, Sihanouk declared:

> Finally, our capital must deal with the problem of the urban population… We must begin the construction of low-cost apartment buildings that can be rented or sold to average and small-income families. This will no doubt take some time and requires progressive planning and investment (Ross and Collins, 2006, p.16).

A centrepiece of the response to the "problem of the urban population" was the ambitious Bassac River Front cultural complex that lay on reclaimed land along the Bassac river.
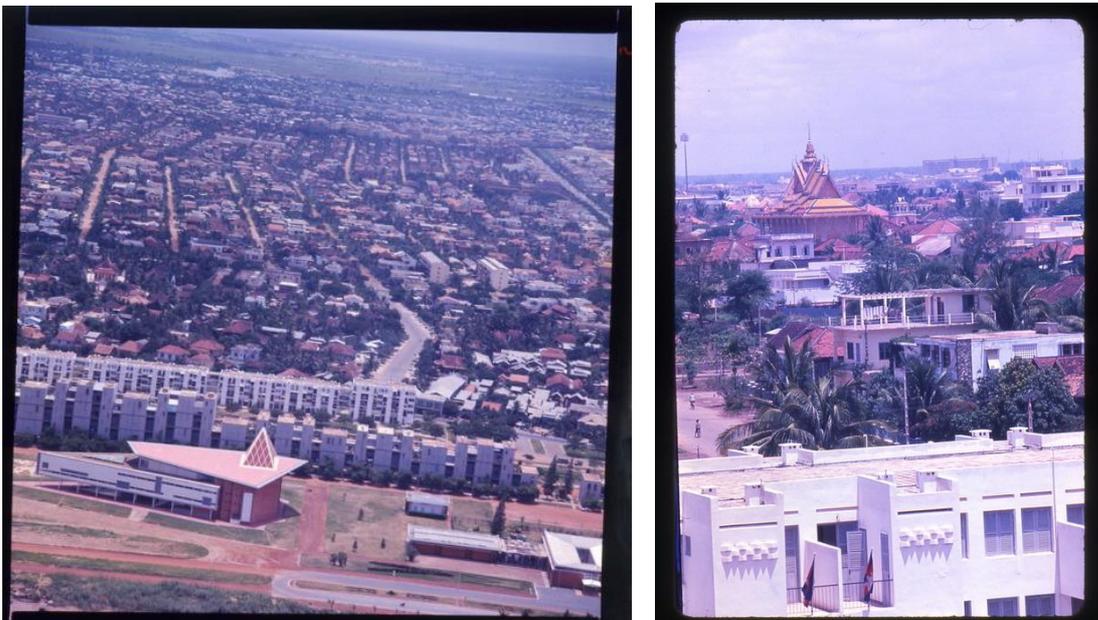
Images of the White Building and the newly completed Front de Bassac development, 1963, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The image on the left shows the National Theatre with its iconic pyramid roof. The image on the right features the White Building in the bottom of frame and Wat Langka behind. From the Charles Meyer Collection

The White Building (originally known as the Municipal Apartments) was a key part of this Bassac River Front cultural complex. Vann Molyvann, the first Cambodian architect to receive a modern education in France, oversaw the entirety of the development of this cultural complex. Vann was immediately appointed Director of Urban Planning and State Architect upon his return to Cambodia in 1956, overseeing numerous urban planning projects (Grant Ross, 2015, p.168). The inclusion of the White Building in the Bassac

River Front cultural complex plan was Vann's first large-scale experiment in applying modern ideas on public housing, and one that was inspired both by Le Corbusier's utopian project La Ville Radieuse (Ly & Muan, 2001) and Ebenezer Howard's concept of the Garden City (Eimer, 2014).[3] This differs from its early European development as a movement that was drawn, to some extent, from anarchist roots (Ward & Hall, 1999). Yet, Castells (1977) is probably closer to the mark describing it as a utopian reactionary movement that expresses a profound demand of the working class, but in a backward looking ideological envelope. As a movement, its original intent was quickly compromised displaying and, in many ways, reproducing the dominant values held by elements within the British establishment (Foley, 1960). Its original premise was that of locating a "third way between capitalism and socialism", but in actuality it projected a form of urban governmentality (Osborne & Rose, 1999, p. 748). In all, it developed into a conceptualised space of techno-bureaucracy that became hugely influential within modernist town planning ideology, while remaining conveniently "congenial to British values" (Foley, 1960, p. 215). With the "pretensions of expert knowledge" the Garden City utopianism presented a cure for social ills that quickly degenerated into bourgeois self-interested. In Southeast Asia, from the post Second World War period up until the present day, these ideas have informed a top down nostalgic fetishisation of community culture (Douglass & Huang, 2007, p. 9).

The Grey and White Buildings, 1966

Consider, then, this influence in the Cambodian context of the 1950s and early 1960s where a modernising desire existed within a newly independent setting that was also

entwined with utopian desire and reactionism. This reactionism was in response to the rapid urbanisation and the post-France, post-colonial experience of independence. Despite the universalising pressure of the dominant discursive practices of an expansionary modernist and capitalist outlook, Vann Molyvann's influence exuded distinctly Cambodian characteristics. The backward glances and an imagined utopian modern city merged to form an ideological frame that was evident in the idealisation of Cambodian village life (Chandler, 1984) and in the Sihanouk government's utopian vision of a new Golden age of Cambodia harking back to the Khmer Angkorian empire (Falser in Wintle, 2015, p. 150). Importantly, this historically based idealisation and utopian vision is set within the frame of traditional Cambodian power relations based on the patronage paradigm of power distribution in society (Vickery, 1999; see also Un & Hughes, 2011).

Rare colour photo of White Building (top right), Grey Building and the iconic pyramid roof of the Bassac National Theatre behind, c. 1966.

We identify three distinct periods over the life of the building. The first is a period that many Cambodians, artists and historians characterise as a 'Golden Age' in which the God-King shrugged off the cloak of royalty to become the first Prime Minister and to lead the country from the shackles of French colonialism, transforming the capital into the "Pearl of Asia" (Saphan, 2013, p. 64). Sihanouk's substantial and often profligate

spending during this period was focussed on building his vision of a modern Cambodia. Inspired by a similar development in Casablanca, the White Building itself was designed by Cambodian architect Lu Ban Hap and Russian architect Vladimir Bodiansky and inaugurated in 1963 (Sochivy, 2009). Comprised of 468 apartments it was the first attempt to offer a multi-storey modern urban lifestyle to lower- and middle-class Cambodians (Grant Ross and Collins, 2009) and, as a government led, funded and subsidised initiative, was effectively the first government social housing built in the country. This technocratic drive focussed on significant infrastructure, architectural and monumental works and through the creation of new institutions such as government ministries and universities (See Grant Ross and Collins, 2009; Vickery, 1999). At the same time this *conceived* space of blunt post-independence capitalist transition was seen to be tempered by significant constitutional amendments such as the introduction of Khmer as a national language and the extension of suffrage to women. The lived and the imagined were curated through grand cultural programming such as films, music and dance – all of which Sihanouk and his family were not just patrons of but participants in (Chandler, 1991).

The second period can be framed as decimation and survival. From 1970 Cambodia fell into civil war, and then the Khmer Rouge regime. After the fall of Khmer Rouge in 1979, as people moved back to the previously abandoned Phnom Penh,[4] the few surviving artists (mostly performing artists) were called to gather and live in the White Building due to its proximity to the National Theatre (Sarath in Potter & Koam, 2012). Many of Cambodia's artists and intellectuals were killed during the Khmer Rouge regime. In 1979, the *Kampuchea Review* wrote "Out of 190 ballet artists, only 40 escaped death under the Pol Pot – Ieng Sary regime" (*Kampuchea Review*, 1979). In 1982, after accepting the position of Minister of Information and Culture, Chheng Phon said: "The genocidal Pol Pot – Ieng Sary – Khieu Samphan regime destroyed our national culture almost completely and killed almost 80 percent of our male and female performers" (*Kampuchea Review*, 1982; Sam-Ang, 1990b; Turnbull, 1999). In an interview with Susan Pack in 1989, Chheng expanded on his earlier statement saying, "there were 385,737 artists and intellectuals (before the Khmer Rouge); during Pol Pot just 300 people survived" (Pack, 1989; Sam-Ang, 1990a). While exact numbers may never be known, what can be seen is that the Khmer Rouge eviscerated Khmer culture and cultural memory with a brutal intent.

L-R: 1991, children play outside the White Building (Serge Corrieras), 1993, village children in militia training (Roland Neveu), residents on the stairs of the White Building, 1991 (Serge Corrieras)

Post-Khmer Rouge, and in one of the few acts of cultural renewal by the interim Vietnamese government, from 1979 many of the surviving artists were allowed to live rent free (or peppercorn rent) in the White Building and were paid a small stipend to work as artists through the Ministry of Fine Arts and Culture. As Hun Sarath, Chief of Block A in the Building recalls, "the government gathered all the artists to re-build Cambodian culture due to its proximity to the National Theatre." (Sarath in Potter & Koam, 2012) Many of the artists who returned at this time still live in the Building, or have family members who live there and continue to work in arts-related areas. However, despite this support, two decades of crippling economic hardship, natural disasters and ongoing social-political turmoil through the 1980s and 1990s meant that few artists could make a continuous living performing or teaching. At this time just surviving was a triumph.
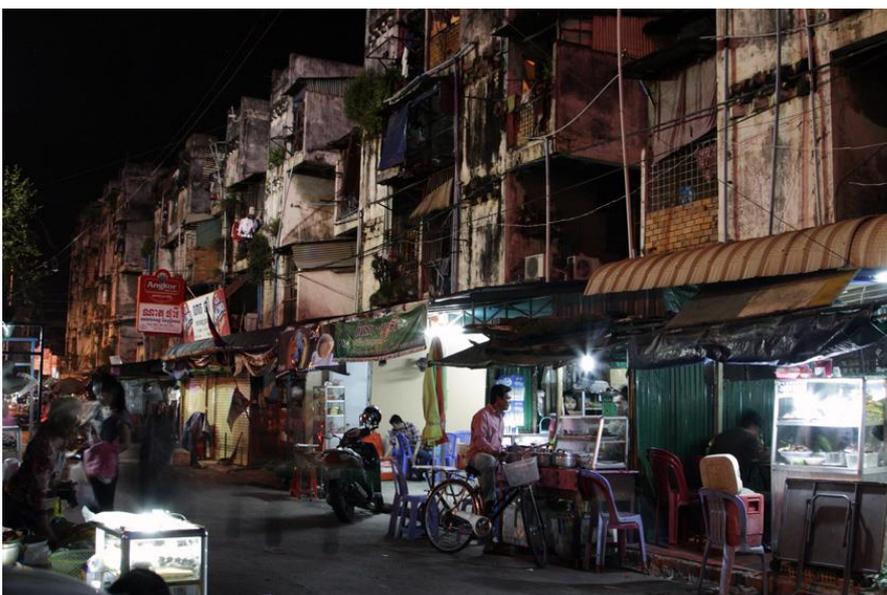
The Building, 2014. Photo by Chhunn Phanith, an Aziza student and participant in the Stories From The Building project

(Re)producing Space: Domination and Resistance in in Contemporary Phnom Penh

From the late 1990s two significant threads emerged in the Building's history – one cultural and one commercial. This third period is framed as renewal. In 1998 Arn Chorn-Pond created the Cambodian Master Performers Program. The program worked with recognised Masters of traditional and royal Cambodian arts (Cambodia Living Arts, 2013). Many of these artists were living in the Building. As a result, the Cambodia Living Arts (CLA) studios were established in 1999 in the White Building and the organisation maintains two studio apartments in the Building to this day. CLA provides an income for many of the Master artists who work as teachers and continues to pay the rent of a number of these artists who were forced to sell their apartments due to financial difficulties in the 1990s and 2000s (Key Mom quoted in Vuong, 2015). CLA moved their main offices and studios in the mid-2000s to a different site. However, CLA's work in identifying the importance of this ageing generation of Masters of Cambodian arts laid the foundations for other cultural interventions in the Building.

From around the same time property developers began circling the Building and surrounds, increasingly interested by the prime inner-city real estate and surging Phnom Penh real estate market (Simone, 2008). The majority of the Bassac River Front development had, by this time, been destroyed, demolished or renovated beyond recognition. The National Theatre was burnt during repairs in 1994 and finally demolished in 2008. The charred remains of the theatre was a central feature of Rithy Panh's 2005 film *The Burnt Theatre* representing both symbolic desecration of the 'golden age' of Khmer post-independence culture and metaphor for the struggle to re-build culture from the ashes of Khmer Rouge destruction.

And after almost two decades of no maintenance and ongoing restructuring of the exterior, the White Building was in poor condition – a fading façade with dilapidated infrastructure. Neighbouring squatter communities to the Building such as Dey Krahom and a number of Tonle Bassac communities began to be forcibly evicted from the early 2000s (Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights 2006, 2008, 2009a; Sisovann & Quinn, 2007; Barton & Cheang, 2006; Community Legal Education Centre, 2006). The most brutal and largest eviction of the Dey Krahom settlement saw about 850 families have their homes bulldozed before they were loaded into trucks and driven an hour north or south of the city and dumped in a field – most of them with no access to running water or electricity, many of them without access to shelter or

schooling for their children and none of them with access to local markets. (Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, 2009b; LICADHO-Canada, 2008; Shozi, 2014). From inner-city living to the margins of society in a day. The widespread demolition or substantial reconstruction of the Bassac Front development is part of a wider pattern of neoliberal accumulation and spatial reckoning (in the city).


Panorama of the White Building, 2007. By Tadashi Ono

This trend of dispossession and accumulation has continued with The White Building residents living under threat of eviction from their home. Imbricated and very much central to this process is the Hun Sen Government refusal of individual and communal applications had prevented any substantial renovation or maintenance works. In 2014 there were alleged strategic purchases of White Building apartments by a local developer (Yin & Blomberg, 2014) and public statements to demolish the White Building were made by high ranking politicians including Phnom Penh's Governor (Hul & Yin, 2014b), while in 2015 nearby building works caused structural damage to the Building (Sen & Cuddy, 2015). Judging by evictions in surrounding neighbourhoods (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2009), this would result in up to 3000 people being forcibly re-located to the margins of the city far from their work, markets, schools and their social network (LICADHO-Canada, 2008) and with little compensation or support. However, despite the sustained threat of forced eviction, there has been the emergence of a movement that has challenged the dominant social relations to recognise The White Building as a space of creative resistance, with an intent to creatively collaborate to maximize residents, artists and the communities access to resources and opportunity in the city (Simone, 2008). Lefebvre (1984) emphasised the need to excavate everyday life for political possibilities that could point towards alternative visions and the pragmatic resistance by Building residents appears to be a practical example of this idea. As Brenner (2001) points out, Lefebvre's dialectical utopianism provides a salient reminder that everyday life under capitalism is permeated with utopian possibilities and strivings— of both reactionary and progressive variants, and with foreboding, benign, or emancipatory possibilities.

(Re)producing Space: Art and Storytelling as Resistance in Contemporary Phnom Penh

From 2008 artists became active in the space again. In 2008 photographer Maria Stott worked with a number of emerging Cambodian photographers including Vandy Rattana to create On Photography Cambodia (OPC) – a series of participatory photography programs in the Building. OPC was a photographic exploration of Phnom Penh's past, present and future through the juxtaposition of different photographic perspectives – historical photos, family album photos and contemporary images made by community members and professional – all of which focussed on the White Building. For, OPC, the Building simultaneously symbolizes "the highpoint of modern Khmer architecture and urban planning, Cambodia's tumultuous past and the urban challenges of today" (Stott, 2009). OPC launched in January 2008, undertook monthly community workshops from October 2008 until end 2009 and produced a number of exhibitions from late 2008 and through 2009. The project highlighted arts potential for negative capability, re-defined by Unger as "the denial of whatever in our contexts delivers us over to a fixed scheme of division and hierarchy and to an enforced choice between routine and rebellion" (2004, pp. 279-280). This understanding of the potential for art and art makers to create resistance (or denial) of perceived fixed divisions and hierarchies is important in the subsequent transformation of the community.
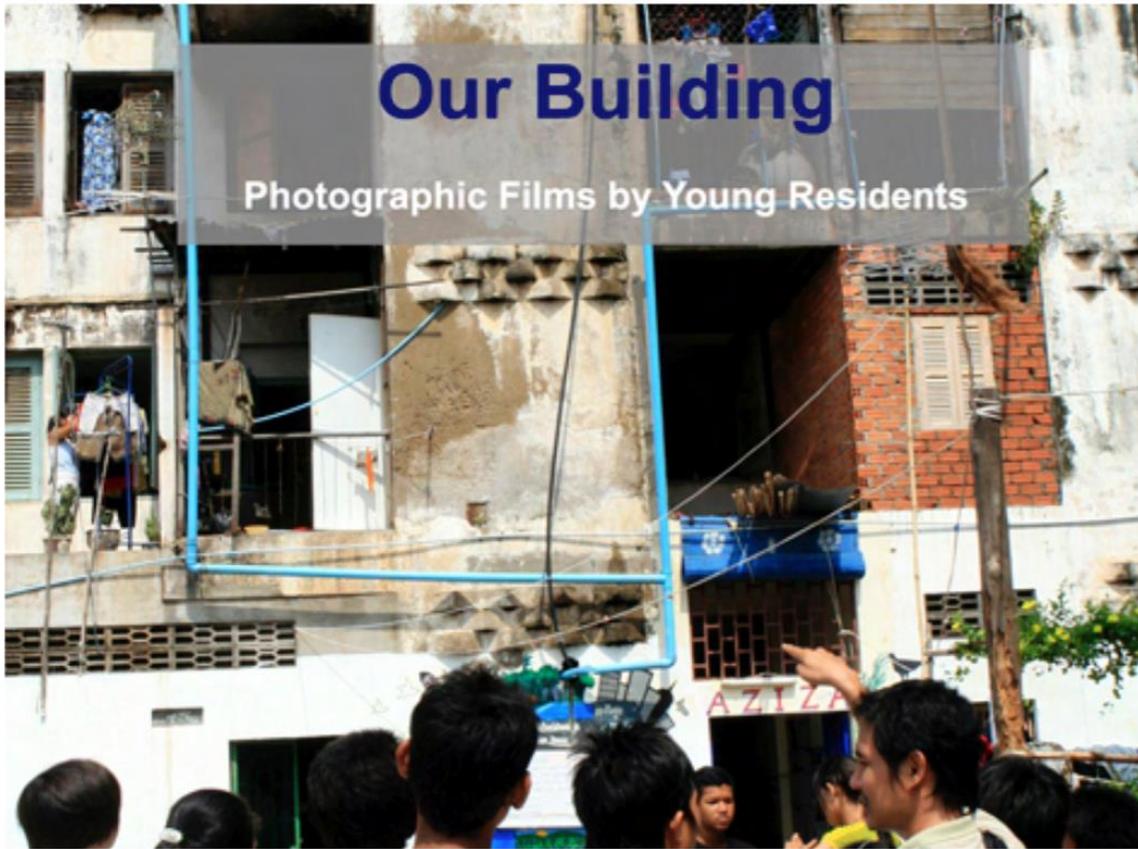
Top image: xover of the 'Our Building' DVD produced by the On Photography Cambodia team. Bottom left: Sok Ieng , participant. Bottom right: "The Pipes" by Sok Ieng

Residents of the Building, represented in mainstream media and widely understood as a slum overrun by drugs, gang and prostitution, could offer alternative visions of the diverse community. OPC also represented a connective tissue between the end of CLA's localised work in the Building and the emergence of a sequence of new artistic engagements that would ultimately build on the community's artistic history, connect generations of old and new artists, generate new partnerships between the community and external groups and individuals and create new spaces that resist dominant

discourses that are perpetuated, both in terms of how the Building and its residents are viewed and the manner in which it has engendered a resistance to the *conceived* dominance of technocratic and neoliberal expansionary practice. As a project it injected fun and enjoyment into the Building, but, as Lefebvre pointed out, it is clear that the "quest for a counter-space" must derive from individual bodies through the appropriation of space—including new spaces for enjoyment (1991, p. 383). Occupation and appropriation of public space is a defining feature of both the right to the city and differential space. The right to collective expression in public is one of the key markers of genuine, democratic public space. OPC pursued a quest for counter-space through reimagining the Building as a possible site of artistic and creative resistance that could meaningfully and materially impact the everyday lives of residents.

In 2009 and 2010 the two key contemporary, ongoing artistic strands emerged. Inspired by his work with OPC, photographer Vandy Rattana proposed the idea of the creation of a residential community art program in the Building with the art collective *Stiev Selapak* (Art Rebels), the first Cambodian artist collective. The space would serve as a knowledge sharing space and to support artists to realise new ideas. The vision was for a flexible space, emphasising collaboration and experimentation and named Sa Sa Art Projects – a shortening of *Stiev Selapak* (Nelson, 2012). The group also understood the historical context of the space with Sa Sa co-founder Vuth Lyno observing in Nelson, 2012 that the Building "is an artists' community." From the outset Sa Sa also embraced fluidity with Vuth mocking NGO jargon of sustainability as he discussed the potential impermanence of the community due to the ongoing threat of eviction as well as Sa Sa's temporal nature and fluid, unregistered structure, "What do we sustain? Ourselves and not the thing that we want to sustain" (Nelson, 2012).

From 2010, Sa Sa developed three main program strands – arts classes and workshops, artist residencies and collaborative projects were held in a re-purposed apartment space in the Building. Numerous events gave some focus to these ongoing activities. Most notably was the White Night, which began in December 2011 as a collaboration between Sa Sa, UK artist The Incidental and some community members. This represented Sa Sa's first substantial collaboration with a foreign artist and saw works exhibited in public and communal spaces.

The second contemporaneous strand emerged in early 2010 when filmmaker (and co-author) Martin Potter and Cambodian filmmaker Koam Chanrasmey worked in the

Building producing a documentary with the dancer, singer and teacher Hun Sarath. Sarath was a Building resident who was one of the original returning artists of 1979 and was becoming increasingly active in the community. She was, at that time, starting to campaign to become Chief of one of the two blocks of the Building, a campaign that would ultimately prove successful in 2012.[5] In an early interview, Sarath stated that the artists in the Building needed to be active in the community and to be leaders and visionaries (Potter & Koam, 2012). Sarath understood, all too well, the importance of her own lived experience as a means to challenge, alter and ameliorate government and business interest in the building. Indeed, she considered her intervention necessary into order for the Building community to survive. The space, the communities within the Building, could not simply be 'papered' over (see Wilson 2011; Louth 2015); the lived, the imagined and the everyday use of the space could not simply be subsumed.

In the numerous, simultaneous programs running in and around the Building, Potter and Koam (2012) identified potential for partnerships to build a stronger sense of counter-space. However there was little communication between the programs and within the general community communication was highly fragmented. Simone (2008) identifies through interviews with residents an identification of three principal sub-communities in the Building – the sex work section, artists' section and the police section,[6] with migrants to Phnom Penh from rural areas constituting a highly mobile fourth section. There was no sense of a shared communal identity. The external perspective of the Building as a crime-riddled slum impacted deeply on the residents. The government's refusal to allow restoration works compounded this perspective as the Building slowly decayed. Some residents, driven by perceived fear of gangs in the Building, had installed lockable gates blocking entry to their entire floor. Many residents were ashamed to say they came from the Building. Up to 40 per cent of the Building population had lived in Phnom Penh for less than 12 months and there was a high turnover of residents. Outsiders were often initially treated with varying degrees of distrust (Simone, 2008). This included the Sa Sa Art Projects group who initially found it difficult to engage the broader community. The positioning of Sa Sa as 'rebels' (*Stiev*) indicated to many residents a radical political agenda that was easy to identify. By defining themselves according to an agenda of radical creativity the outsider, middle-class Cambodian artists struggled to gain the trust of the community and other organisations working in the Building. Their own radicalism resulted in the group being relatively marginalised by the community. Having the Sa Sa gallery space based within an apartment inside the Building and inviting others in was a further condition for marginalization – a kind of 'fixed space' dilemma. By this we mean

that the gallery was open to receive the public but the community were reluctant to enter, while the gallery was the place where artists would do and show work and wait for the public to come to.

The diverse community perspectives about who to trust, how to share power and control and troubled notions of communal identity required both internal and external facilitators working together to create partnerships between groups working independently in the Building as well as engaging community members in some of the programs and working across the often siloed community partners in order to strengthen these partnerships. Working with Hun Sarath, a respected community member legitimised Potter and Koam to members of the old arts and police section in the Building. The peripatetic nature of the filmmaking process enabled Potter and Koam to move throughout the Building and to build a network, circumventing the 'fixed dilemma' which had characterised Sa Sa's experience. This meant, as external facilitators, Potter and Koam could easily move across the siloed partners and sub-communities within the Building. After some months of filming Potter and Koam initiated a film program in August 2012, in partnership with Aziza School which was based in the Building, partly in order to extend the documentary project and partly in response to interest expressed by a group of residents. Participants in the film program also worked with Sa Sa Art Projects and Aziza School and rapidly developed their creative and organisational skills. As Vuth (2014) observed,

> The group of the video workshop students that we worked with, you could call them the youth leaders in the community, they have a certain spirit of commitment to the community and a spirit of activism, participating in demonstrations or documenting political events. You don't have to tell them; they do their own things.

In November, 2012 an exhibition *Snit Snaal*[7] (translation: loving, friendly and intimate with another) was staged to showcase works produced by the participants. Vuth Lyno, in the curator's statement for the program wrote of the exhibition,

> is intended to be enjoyed by everyday Cambodians, in particular the residents of the White Building themselves. The works are all new, created by twenty young art students and community organisers from the neighbourhood. They look at issues in the White Building community, as well as in their own homes elsewhere in Phnom Penh, and also in the city more broadly. (Vuth, 2012)

Postcard of Snit Snaal exhibition, 2012 co-created with Sa Sa Art Projects, Martin Potter and Koam Chanrasmey.

This program was the most substantial engagement with public and shared spaces in and around the Building. The Sa Sa gallery hosted an exhibition, however other spaces also became exhibition spaces. Video installations were placed in numerous businesses on the ground floor. A local café became a cinema showing films made by the film school participants, as well as films by Cambodian and international filmmakers, and one of the Aziza School classrooms became the site for a multi-screen installation work. Most of the films that were featured in the café cinema over the course of a 7-day mini film festival were focused on people from the Building and life in and around the Building. Participants in the films and the filmmakers presented and discussed their stories. As many stories, materials and other resources as possible that were available within the community were used in staging the program. Video works that were produced were played on TVs and DVDs borrowed from individuals and businesses throughout the Building. The cinema screen was made by Aziza School students, graphic design was done by Building based designers, promotion of the event within the Building community was by community members who were also guides for outside guests enabling them to navigate the different sites of the exhibition. Even community clean up and maintenance works were organised by community members.

L-R: TV playing Aziza students film in the chess café; in the hairdressers; restaurant

L-R: detail of 11 channel video installation at Aziza; children watch a story; reverse of classroom

The experience of this event created substantial enthusiasm and interest. The event was a foundation for Sa Sa to initiate an artist in residency program *Pisaot.*[8] Other non-art outcomes that had formed lead-up events (such as community cleanup programs and other community organising like shared savings to undertake maintenance works in the Building) became regular activities. Snit Snaal was the foundation for a subsequent program in January 2014 called Bonn Phum (The Village Festival). Bonn Phum was a multi-platform and multi-event program.[9] Again Bonn Phum featured exhibitions in the Sa Sa Gallery, the café cinema festival, video installations in local businesses and Aziza School. The Festival also featured performances on the rooftop of the Building, with almost 1000 people in attendance to watch original music and choreography created by Building resident Hun Sarath. This performance took classical Khmer court music and dance and re-imagined it for the Building community. Local bands performed at ground level and community archive, reading room and library spaces were opened. An online archive whitebuilding.org was also launched at this time. According to a survey by the newly formed White Building Collective, Bonn Phum engaged over 75 per cent of the Building population.[10] It also created the impetus for the creation of the "Humans of Phnom Penh" series initiated by the video group with the support of Damien Rayuela.[11] Vuth (2014) explores the activities of the Bonn Phum program in depth, we will focus on the outcomes and connection to Lefebvre's theories in relation to creative (re)production of the space.

L-R: Upstairs in Sa Sa Art Project space; Café converted to cinema; Veasna and Aziza students watch the films

L-R: the café cinema

The Bonn Phum festival reiterated and expanded on the *Snit Snaal* model of temporary community action – involving students and White Building residents in actively utilizing and transforming existing resources and spaces within the neighbourhood into artistic intervention and engagement, establishing stronger and intimate social relations amongst the community members. This action minimises dependency of the residents and students on external facilitators such as Sa Sa Art Projects, and enables residents to lead their own future actions. This community leadership and independence was strongly evident when government representatives threatened to demolish the White Building as reported in the *Cambodia Daily* newspaper published on 4 September, 2014 (Hul & Yin, 2014a). That day, the White Building Collective and a few other residents prepared an action plan, organized a community meeting on the rooftop to begin a process of community led consultation and mobilisation. The following week after a sustained campaign in the press the government retracted their statement (Hul & Yin, 2014b). Subsequently Building community leaders met with government and presented a community led submission to Phnom Penh city council and the Ministry of Planning. This has led to a 'step by step' agreement in July 2015. As Chumm Phanith, White Building Collective member, resident and community organiser, noted in relation to getting government permissions to do renovation work, "We can do it step by step not all in one time. Because if we ask to do it all, then they don't easy say yes." (Potter, 2015).

Classical dance performance on the White Building rooftop at sunset. Old and new works choreographed by White Building resident and dancing master Hun Sarath and performed by artists from the White Building. Photos by Damien Rayuela.

Conclusion: Emergence of a Radical Collective and an Art of Empathy

The aesthetic of the contemporary arts and media produced at the White Building reflects the multiple facets of the community's responses to contemporary Cambodia. It seeks to experiment and find a new contemporary and communal language and subjectivity utilising traditional practices and incorporating new technology and modern ideas, collaboration with Cambodian and visiting artists – insiders and outsiders, locals and international guests. Developing spaces that re-imagine the norms of the dominant culture and provide for new ways to build community, social relations, and the production of new stories and creative acts. This implies the development of forms of art that do not fit neatly within the dominant proto-neoliberal regulatory experience of post-conflict Cambodia (Louth, 2015). The work of making, teaching and sharing – by key groups such as the White Building Collective and Sa Sa Art Projects – responds to both current circumstances as well as larger contemporary issues. It also seeks a practice to address and engage everyday experience and everyday Cambodians with creative and cultural practices outside of the exclusive spaces of galleries and museums. This collapsing of barriers to accessibility and participation produces compelling art and stories and take on issues of the right to representation, memory and place.

Once art activities occurred at the level of the everyday, relationships and trust emerged (or were re-imagined) within the Building. An ongoing program of presentations in public and shared spaces that built on an identifiable cultural tradition and practice already present in the Building drew on and encouraged participation of both old Masters and youth residents in the Building. Relationships and trust blossomed between residents as well as between artist facilitators, local organisations and sections of the community. The ongoing, flexible and creative programs and spaces inside the Building – which become both public and social space – embody resistance. Resistance is spatial in that it has to take place in specific locations under localized conditions by people with alternative opinions, political sensibilities, desires, and the will to make things happen. This doesn't mean that this 'radical space' has to have a radical political agenda that is easy to identify. This was about developing existing spaces throughout the Building where the norms of the dominant culture could be re-imagined, and where there was provision for new ways to build community and social relations through the production of new stories and creative acts. As a result there has been significant development of individual and collective groups of artists who also now work as teachers, mentors and facilitators to new groups of residents.

The activist and artistic tradition embedded throughout the community across generations has been re-invigorated and when it seemed that the community's demise was a fait accompli, that it was going to simply succumb to the wishes of the government and developers, that a path of resistance has emerged. With such a strong creative community in the Building and a history as a site of social inclusion it is unsurprising that artistic expression would form a part of the activism in the space. And this is an activism that is not uncommon, as it appears to pervade many contemporary art movements of Southeast Asia reflecting, as Tan Bun Hui observes, an art of empathy rather than direct activism (Bun Hui in Van den Bosch, 2012). In some sense, we feel that we can offer a qualified answer to Lefebvre's question of whether we must resign ourselves to the dominance of abstract technocratic and bureaucratic space with a tendency towards violent repression (Lefebvre, 1991). Creative resistance – however fleeting – provides an empathetic turn that offers an insight into possible emancipatory moments. Moreover, this 'turn' can translate into material resistance as can be seen by emergence of the 'Save the White Building' movement.

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[1] In 2012, the most active participants in the White Building program established the Facebook page "Save the White Building" and the hashtag #savethewhitebuilding as part of process of active resistance to Government and developer interest. The page has since been renamed to simply the 'White Building' (@whitebuildingphnompenh). The title of this paper reflects this initial creative autonomous action of what would become the White Building Collective.

[2] David Harvey (1990: 218-221) interprets Lefebvre's triad as 1. Material spatial practices (experience); 2. Representations of space (perception); 3. Spaces of representation (imagination).

[3] The Garden City (or suburb) is a concept that, while distinctly European, is recognisable in the Southeast Asian early twentieth century colonial context, but in a form that addressed the needs of a colonial expatriate community (Dick and Rimmer, 1998).

[4] Phnom Penh was evacuated by the Khmer Rouge within a week of arriving in and taking the capital in April 1975. Many buildings such as government institutions, banks and churches were blown up – however, most homes and businesses were simply locked and left. Less than 2000 people remained in the city during the following 3 years, 8 months with KR cadre only returning to raid businesses and homes for supplies (Kiernan, 1996; Chandler, 1992).

[5] For local council administrative purposes the Building is divided into two Blocks with a Chief representative elected for each block.

[6] According to Simone these are broad, historical categories self-described by residents. However, it must be reinforced the work of the residents constitutes a more complex cross-section – a fact Simone acknowledges – e.g. of the area defined as the 'police section' Simone (2008, p.192) notes that most of them "had sold off their apartments and moved elsewhere in the city." The key point is that the community self-siloed its identities.

[7] An archive of some of the work produced can be viewed at http://whitebuilding.org/en/collections/snit_snaal

[8] Details on Pisaot residencies can be viewed at : http://sasaart.info/pisaot.htm

[9] An online archive showcasing some of the work produced and some images from the events can be viewed at : http://whitebuilding.org/en/collections/bonn-phum-the-village-festival

[10] The White Building Collective were formed by participants in the video group. The survey was conducted during the week of Bonn Phum and involved content analysis of works produced and the number of active community participants and head count of audience members (combined with head count of community members at events). This formed the basis for a report written by Potter and Vuth to acquit funding for HIVOS' Arts Collaboratory.

[11] Humans of Phnom Penh can be viewed at : https://www.facebook.com/HoPPCambodia.