

4 **A Genealogy of Phnom Penh's White Building**

From Modern Minimal Housing Unit to Reimagining of Alternative Urban Futures

Pen Sereypagna

Introduction

Cambodia has experienced a turbulent history from the old Khmer state and the French Protectorate to independence, civil war, genocide, and the present four decades of post-conflict development. Urban features from each era were overlaid onto the landscape of Phnom Penh, making for a particularly diverse city. In this essay, I begin with an overview of “New Khmer Architecture” of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum era (1953–70)¹ which aimed to blend modern techniques and materials with Cambodian tradition. I then review the interruption of the Sangkum period in Cambodia by the Civil War and discuss post-conflict developments up to the contemporary period.

Through this review, I aim to draw attention to the futuristic ideology of New Khmer Architecture in the 1960s by highlighting the technological and design aspects of the White Building. Built in 1963 to house middle-income tenants, the White Building stands prominently on Samdach Sothearos Boulevard near the Bassac River. The 468-apartment building has since deteriorated structurally, though its form and use have been transformed in complex ways through the tumultuous periods of recent Cambodian history. By studying the adaptations and informality of the White Building, I argue that the White Building can be read in terms of changing futurisms in Phnom Penh.

Research Methodology

I conducted ethnographic research with communities at the White Building from January to September 2015. During the first three months I received a residency program from SASA Art Projects, Phnom Penh's only artist-run space, in partnership with the School of Constructed Environment, PARSONS the New School for Design. During my stay there, I built up relationships with residents and activists at the White Building, which was under the threat of demolition,² and I had the opportunity to experience their lifestyle as well as to observe the area and interact with the communities living there.

I draw upon four sources of data in what follows. The first source comprises interviews with some ninety families that were conducted with the assistance of two young activists at the White Building, Chhum Phanith and Kourn Lyna. The interviews focused on a variety of histories, ranging from the oral history of a family to the history of political movements in the city. The second source of data consists of a collection of maps in six distinctive periods from 1921 to 2015. The maps are interpreted as representing different urban forms imagined by city actors with specific political, economic, and cultural goals. The third source is my own ethnographic observation. While I was living inside the White Building, I observed and interacted with people in the Building and its vicinity, documenting what I could in journals and photographs. Finally, the fourth source is made up of published and printed documents such as magazines, newspapers, books, and old photographs.

The Sangkum Reastr Niyum Era

Cambodia gained independence from colonial rule in 1953. Under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Phnom Penh doubled in size in the ten years between 1958 and 1968. Sihanouk established the Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime in 1955. Inspired by Western socialism, the Prince sought to create a perfect society by improving the people's lives through culture, architecture and urban planning.

In Phnom Penh, urban planning used radiating boulevards and monuments as anchoring devices to establish a system of urban order. The city focused on national infrastructure projects to improve lifestyle, educational opportunities and prospects for the future in an economy that seemed to grow stronger with every school, university, factory, and development project. Foreign funding was often obtained for urban projects such as

factories, hospitals and educational facilities. Norodom Sihanouk also asked countries to provide other forms of aid such as technical assistance and architectural consultancy. Donor countries included China, France, Japan, the Soviet Union, and America.

The modern architectural movement of using reinforced concrete and assertive structures founded by Le Corbusier and other Western architects was especially influential and inspired the modern movement in Cambodia that came to be known as New Khmer Architecture. New buildings blended European modernism with Cambodian tradition and Phnom Penh became a regional model for urban planning, design and construction. New Khmer Architecture also engaged with a range of other international modernisms. Architects and engineers from Japan, Europe, the Soviet Union, the US and elsewhere joined with Cambodians on many major projects. Among the best-known foreign collaborators was the influential Russian engineer Vladimir Bodiansky,³ although overall, links to France remained the most significant international influence in Phnom Penh's urban development.⁴ In addition, the early years of Phnom Penh's independence saw a strengthening of indigenous planning capacity.

New Khmer Architecture should be understood not only as a vernacularization of "International Style" modernism, but also as a negotiation between many other design approaches from diverse sources.⁵ In their landscaping, tree-planting, lighting and scale, boulevards were designed not only for vehicular traffic but also for pedestrians. The cosmopolitanism and the visual order of Phnom Penh in the 1960s allowed the city to gain a reputation as the Garden City in Southeast Asia.

Bassac Riverfront Project

From 1953 to 1970, Phnom Penh accommodated an explosion in its population from 370,000 to one million.⁶ Public experiments in housing were a key feature in this period. The Bassac Riverfront project was constructed on twenty-four hectares of landfill along the swampy flood plain of the Bassac River, in order to provide more affordable high-density housing adapted to Cambodian lifestyle and a new cultural center for Phnom Penh. It was the first experimental modern urban development project in the city involving many buildings. A group of important national and international architects and engineers worked on the project, including Vladimir Bodiansky, Gerald Hanning, Robert Hansberger, Lu Ban Hap, and Vann Molyvann.

In the Bassac Riverfront Complex there were cultural and social buildings such as Preah Suramarit National Theater, Exhibition Halls, a

conservatory for dance and theater-makers, a Water Sports Complex, the Bassac Municipal Apartments (as the White Building was formerly known), the Olympic Village Apartments (known as the Gray Building), and the National Bank Apartments. All were set in landscaped gardens.

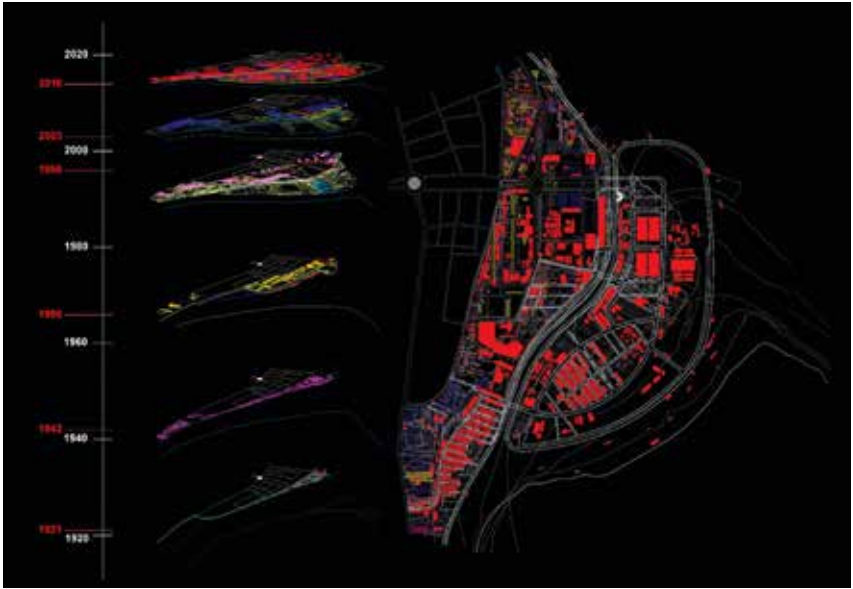
The Bassac Riverfront Complex was a showcase for New Khmer Architecture and it was put on frequent display. The Complex was featured in films and photographs made by Prince Sihanouk to promote and celebrate Cambodia's modernization during this period. Foreign dignitaries and other state visitors were often taken along the main Boulevard to view its modern architectural icons and then to the Complex to see exhibitions and performances.

Disruption and Revival

The utopian dream of the 1960s was disrupted by civil war. By the late sixties Cambodia was a financial wreck and domestic politics were turning against Sihanouk. U.S. intervention in the war in Vietnam spilled over. After the collapse of the Sihanouk regime in 1970, the U.S.-backed General Lon Nol controlled the country. This led to several years of civil war. Between 1970 and 1973 the U.S. bombed the countryside, resulting in the extensive migration of rural Cambodians to Phnom Penh. Because of the conflict, the city lacked the capacity to provide housing for increasing numbers of people. The urban fabric of the city increasingly fragmented. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh and began to rewrite the urban landscape of the city by emptying its population (including the White Building), ruining its physical features and destroying its social fabric.⁷

After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, people returned to Phnom Penh from different parts of the country. In order to provide shelters for artists and to revive human resources for the arts, the White Building became artists' residences under the Ministry of Culture and Information. Two blocks of the Building on the North side were filled with dancers, musicians, artists and filmmakers, while the other four blocks of the Building remained empty.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Phnom Penh's population grew but the government did not have a clear vision for the city's future. Phnom Penh suffered from a lack of planning and the government struggled to provide formal shelter for many people who wished to live in the city. Many squatters built their homes on public land and lakes, including in and around the White Building. The lands on both sides of the Building



4.1 Bassac Timeformation showing the development of Bassac area from 1921 to 2016. Courtesy of Pen Sereypagna.

were occupied by squatters. These included taxi drivers, police and military officers, carpenters, artists, and so on.

Since the opening up of the economy in 2000, Phnom Penh has seen an extensive rise in urban construction. The current growth of the economy of the city is based on the exploitation of urban space for construction and redevelopment. Many public areas have been privatized and sold off to Chinese or South Korean investment companies for ambitious urban development projects such as Diamond Island, Camko City, and Grand Phnom Penh. Often, foreign corporations enter into lucrative partnerships with powerful people in the government or ruling party. The Bassac area has become a hub for private developments such as a casino, shopping mall, office buildings and wedding halls. This rapid development has changed the face of the area dramatically.

More widely, redevelopment has reshaped the city center significantly and has increasingly pushed poorer residents to the city periphery. The micro-economies of street vendors, stalls and small-scale commercial streets are being eliminated in the face of new rules and regulations, new shopping malls and new ideals of cleanliness and hygiene. Low-income people are losing their livelihood and are being displaced from the center of the city. Because of the inflation of land prices in the city center, many poor communities have been evicted. The Dey Krohorm community, for example, which was one of the biggest slum areas in Phnom Penh with 1,465 households

spread over 4.7 hectares located directly behind the White Building, was evicted by the authorities in 2009.⁸ The area was sold to a private company and is now home to swanky restaurants, bars and entertainment joints.

White Building as Sangkum's Future

In contrast to current developments, the White Building historically introduced the idea of relatively *low-cost* high-rise housing into the city. The White Building was designed by Cambodian architect Lu Ban Hap



4.2 The White Building in 1960s.
Courtesy of Vann Molyvann's private collection.

together with Vladimir Bodiensky. An innovative ownership scheme was implemented, where tenants would pay rent over a period of ten years to the municipality before assuming ownership. This applied mainly to members of the lower middle classes seeking to become owner-occupiers, such as government officials and the intelligentsia. The White Building was built as the first experimental social housing for a high-density city of Sangkum's future. It introduced new ways and experiences of modern living.

The Sangkum era proved to be a golden age of optimism and experimentation in which new creative movements flourished, not least within

architecture. This gave rise to ideas of the modern Cambodian of the future, who strived to develop her/his country, based on cultural fundamentals in which new buildings merged European modernism with Cambodian vernacular architecture. In an interview with Cambodian architect Vann Molyvann, he expressed, “In the current redevelopment of Phnom Penh, many foreign developers, especially the Chinese and Koreans, are imposing their own urban forms and ways of life on the city. Unlike the current development, in the 1960s, while Phnom Penh urban planning followed traces left by the colonial regime, the architects and government sought to invent their own styles of design and techniques that suited and were representative of Cambodian people and culture.”⁹

We can see this determination in the White Building. The design of White Building sought to combine Western modernism and Khmer ideas of living. The apartments are clearly separated into two spaces. The living area and sleeping area comprise the primary space, and the cooking and toilet areas are the secondary space, similar to traditional Khmer wooden houses. These two spaces are separated by a door, so as to prevent cooking fumes and bad smells from entering into the living space from the kitchen and toilet. The open space at the back allows light and ventilation to go through the apartment. The building was designed to mimic the traditional Khmer house elevated on stilts, thus keeping the ground floor as an open space for various community activities and parking and to protect the building from flooding. This kind of design was typical in Cambodia in the 1960s.

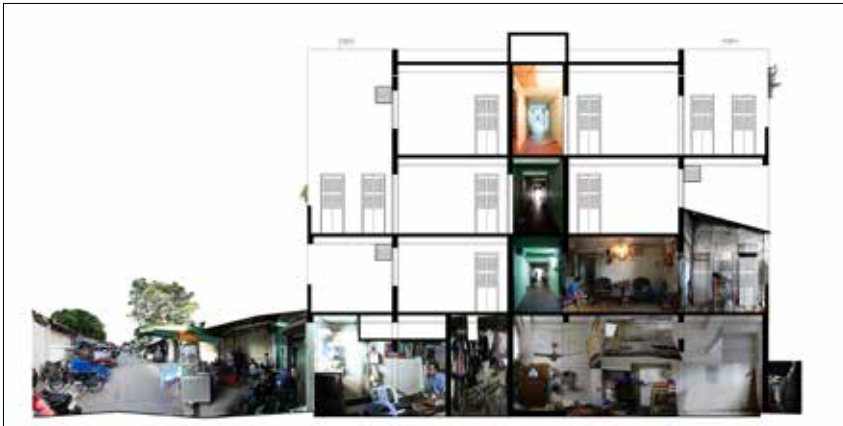
White Building as a Case of the Urban Form's Future

The informal structures added by residents have become some of the most significant elements of the White Building. They not only show how the Building has evolved through the different eras, but also how residents responded to shifting political contexts by adapting their urban ways of life.

After the civil war, the country struggled to feed its people, and the government at that time did not create regulations to control building construction in the city. As a result, there were many squatters in the city. Like other parts of Phnom Penh, to meet living demands, residents closed up the open ground floor of the Building by building partitions to create more housing units and micro-business stalls. Residents also added back patio areas to most apartments in order to create more spaces for sleeping, cooking and storage. Other extra built-out spaces have been added to the Building such as steel roofs, mezzanines, and room partitions. Sok Sovann who has lived in the building since 1979 stated, “the apartment was too small for

my family because our family members increased from year to year, so I built the wooden mezzanine and added some structures to my apartment in order to make some more spaces to live, like other families.”¹⁰ The form of the White Building is flexible, so there were many open spaces which can be added on, both horizontally and vertically, to extend the physical structure and accommodate more people. By way of unregulated accretions, the White Building’s communities made their own architecture that works for them. Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena argued that, “a sustainable design for the future would bring the community into the process to let them decide their own architecture.”¹¹ This idea is particularly suited to the White Building and its communities. Quite unintentionally, the design of the Building allowed residents to adapt their homes and ways of life to the changing political and economic developments of Phnom Penh.

The Building also evolved into a town with its commercial centers woven into its spaces. Many restaurants, coffee shops, grocery shops, card game and gambling dens opened inside the corridors and at the ground floor of the Building. Those shops became not only places for having soft drinks, buying food, or playing but also places for gathering and circulat-



4.3 The overlaying of photos and 2D drawing of a section of the White Building showing the past and present. Courtesy of Pen Sereypagna.

ing social information, from personal matters to political activity. They are places for alternative uses. For example, every Sunday a film is screened for children living in the Building. This film screening takes place at one of the coffee shops on the ground floor at 5:00pm, after the coffee shop has closed.

Another example is the street in front of the Building. In the morning and afternoon, it is the space for parking and storing equipment. But in the evening it becomes space for selling foods such as Khmer Cakes and noodles, barbecued beef, and roasted egg. Sellers at the stalls, in the street and carrying goods around from house to house (or *Neak Louk Robos* in Khmer) are another important element of social and economic life.

The variety of colors of the roofs of added patios, the blue vertical pipes, the green shrubs, the built-out spaces and the grey colors of the external walls have created a negative image of the White Building in the eyes of many upper and middle-class people in Phnom Penh. However, to others, it is precisely these colors that represent the urban grassroots that have made the White Building one of the liveliest buildings in the city.

White Building as an Alternative Vision of Urban Life Through Artistic Experimentation

After forced evacuation during the 1975–79 regime, some of the former residents of the area, including surviving artists, returned to the neighborhood and it became once again a community of artists. For many in Phnom Penh, the White Building became perceived as an irregular community, cloaked in stigma associated with poverty, drugs, sex work, petty crime, dangerous construction and poor sanitation. However, the White Building is also one of the city's most vibrant communities, housing more than 2,500 residents, including classical dancers, master musicians, skilled craftspeople, cultural workers, civil servants, and street vendors.¹²

To revitalize Cambodian traditional arts after civil war, the State provided classes to Cambodian youth, allowing them to acquire basic artistic skills. The classes have been taught by old master artists who live in the White Building. These master artists not only transfer their knowledge to the new generation of art communities in Cambodia, but also engage many people to come to the White Building through their performances and works. They are an important resource for the new generation of artists and activities and they provide a strong voice for the community and Cambodian society as the whole.

In recent years, several arts organizations, such as SaSa Art Projects,¹³ AZIZA School, and On Photography Cambodia, have moved into the Building to organize public and art events to connect artists and the communities in the Building to wider civil society. Such events have helped to introduce the White Building communities to the public, and to raise awareness of the Building and its residents through interactive art expe-

riences. Both the White Building residents and outside people have been invited to participate in the art events in the Building. The White Building's community has thus had opportunities to talk, share, learn and engage in dialogues about their challenges and hopes with the outsiders.

Vuth Lyno, artistic director of SaSa Art Projects, once wrote, "The White Building has been a place for learning, teaching, experimenting, and producing arts and information. It has been an intersected place, where public and private activities meet, where artists and non-artists make dialogue, and arts and communities experience each other."¹⁴ In the face of demolition threats, there has been a revival of this aspect of the White Build-



4.4 Open studio of Genealogy of Bassac project, under SaSa Art Projects residency, in the White Building in 2015. Courtesy of Pen Sereypagna.

ing, as the emerging civil society joins its communities to campaign for the building's survival into the future.

We can also see this trend in an interview with a 26-year-old contemporary dancer, Boramey. She explained how arts organizations are shaping the White Building community, strengthening it and opening the opportunities to communicate with local people and foreigners. She said, "Before and now, I have two different thoughts. Before, I didn't want to tell other people that I lived in the White Building. It was messy and other people thought that this building was not a good place, the place for sex workers and criminals. When other people asked me where my home is, I didn't tell them because I was embarrassed. But now I don't think like that anymore because the White Building is well known by many people internationally. People now know the White Building through arts. There are many arts organizations such as SaSa Art Projects, AZIZA school and so

on, and many arts events that can transform the White Building's condition for the better."¹⁵

Art acts as the facilitator to connect and foster communication between people. Through this dialogue and communication, the future of the city more widely can be evaluated. In addition, urban transformation can be perceived, and operationalized through art and culture projects. Artistic experimentation can be a means of expanding the role of urban design practice and urban theory through interaction, collaboration and dialogue. The White Building is a place where art can be displayed, practiced and learned, and from where the future of alternative urban life can be reimagined.

Conclusion

The current rapid urbanization in Phnom Penh is historically unprecedented within Cambodia but has similarities with contemporary developments in other parts of East and Southeast Asia. Such rapid development can result in the loss of a city's historical and cultural characteristics and exclude the poor. Communities that have grown in place, such as those living in the White Building, should not be seen as problematic but as resources in the face of many developmental challenges.

In fact, I argue that the White Building should be seen as an exemplary case of inclusive and community-centric high-density urbanization. By investigating the genealogy of the Building and its evolving complexity, informality and adaptability from being a well-planned social housing project in the 1960s to one of the most lively communities in Phnom Penh today, I have made the case that the White Building remains a place from where alternative visions of urban life are being imagined and practiced. Urban forms of the future should not be left to the illustrated imaginations of developers and planners, but should be evaluated as actually lived practices residing in rich historical and cultural spaces caught between the past and the present.

Notes

- 1 Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins, eds. *Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture' 1953–70*. (Bangkok: The Key Publisher Ltd., 2006). For scholars, Sangkum Reastr Niyum was a group of Cambodians with a shared ideology for their country--the name translates to "socialism" in the Western sense--formed by King Norodom Siha-nouk. For local people, however, Sangkum Reastr Niyum denotes the period between 1953 and 1970, and it is that more popular usage that I refer to in this essay.
- 2 Rumours of prostitution, drug use and irregular community activity in the White Building have been used by the government to threaten to evict the Building's resident communities in order to privatize for the new development. In early 2015, the Phnom Penh municipality announced its intention to demolish the Building. This news outraged the communities living in the Building and members of the public who valued the White Building as the last historic public building in the area.
- 3 Vladimir Bodiensky is a Russian engineer who came to Cambodia as the United Nation's ex-

pert to assist Cambodia in urban planning in 1960s. For more detail on Vladimir Bodiansky, see Ross and Collins, "Building Cambodia", 95.

4 Willem Paling, "Planning a Future for Phnom Penh: Mega Projects, Aid Dependence and Dis-

5 jointed Governance" *Urban Studies* 49 (2012) 2889–912.
For further reading on New Khmer Architecture, see Vann Molyvann, "New Khmer

6 Ar-chitecture," *The Vann Molyvann Project* (2017). [http://www.vannmolyvannproject.org/](http://www.vannmolyvannproject.org/the-movement)

7 the-movement.
Ross and Collins, "Building Cambodia", 135.
Sophie Clement-Charpentier, "Rebirth of a Capital which was Deserted: The Case of Phnom

8 Penh" *International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments Working Paper*

9 *Series*, 76 (1994) p. 85.
AbdouMaliq Simone, "The Politics of the Possible: Making Urban Life in Phnom

10 Penh" *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 29 (2008) 186–204.
Sok Sovann, personal interview, 8 December 2014.

11 Alejandro Aravena takes about his vision on architecture in his TED talk, "My Architec-

12 tural Philosophy? Bring the Community into the Process" *TEDGlobal 2014* (15:49) October

13 2014. [http://www.ted.com/talks/alejandro_aravena_my_architectural_philosophy_bring_](http://www.ted.com/talks/alejandro_aravena_my_architectural_philosophy_bring_the_community_into_the_process)

14 [the_community_into_the_process](http://www.ted.com/talks/alejandro_aravena_my_architectural_philosophy_bring_the_community_into_the_process).
For more information on the White Building, see SaSa Art Projects and Big Stories Co.,

15 "About" *White Building*. http://whitebuilding.org/en/page/about_the_white_building. SaSa

Art Projects, Phnom Penh's only not-for-profit artist-run space dedicated for experimen-

tal art practices, was founded in 2010 by the Cambodian arts collective Stiev Selapak and is

located in the White Building, see <http://www.sasaart.info>.

Vuth Lyno, "Knowledge Sharing and Learning Together: Alternative Art Engagement from

Stiev Selapak and SaSa Art Projects" *UDAYA: Journal of Khmer Studies* (2014) 253–70.

Boramey, 6 December, 2014. Personal interview.