

White Building: Smart City

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a single purpose building known as the “White Building” that has acquired complexity as a microcosm of an Asian Smart City due to its adaptability from being a well-planned, minimal housing unit in the well-known 1960s Bassac waterfront district, to becoming an art-based, community, mixed - use building.

Keywords: *BASSAC riverfront project, white building, microcosm, new Khmer architecture, collaborative locality*

INTRODUCTION

Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia, is located on the floodplain at the confluence of three rivers: Mekong, Tonle Sap, and Bassac. This situation also ensures its commercial and economic future. However, Phnom Penh today is more focused on economy of space rather than economy of trade, which is making the city undergo a private construction boom. People look at Phnom Penh as Bangkok twenty-five years ago or Ho Chi Minh City fifteen years ago. Many public lands and buildings have been privatized and many of the main sectors of Cambodia's economy are occupied by foreign investors. This article will show how the community of a public building known as the White Building was transformed to survive in the current development of Phnom Penh.

There are three sections in this essay: Smart Building, Smart Community and Smart City. First,

Smart Building will explain the idea of the Bassac River Front project and smart idea of the design of the White Building. Second, Smart Community will study the layers of the White Building. Through interviews with residents the history of community and the surrounding area can be learned. Third, Smart City shows the current development in Phnom Penh which focuses on the area around the White Building and how art helps the community in the context of current developments in Phnom Penh.

SMART BUILDING

The Bassac Riverfront Complex, located on reclaimed land near to the confluence of the Tonle Sap, Mekong and Bassac rivers, is an ambitious public housing and cultural precinct constructed from c.1961¹ to 1968. The project included several exhibition halls, a conservatory for dance and

¹ Helen Grant Ross & Darryl Leon Collins, *Building Cambodia: New Khmer Architecture 1953-1970*, 2006, page 16.

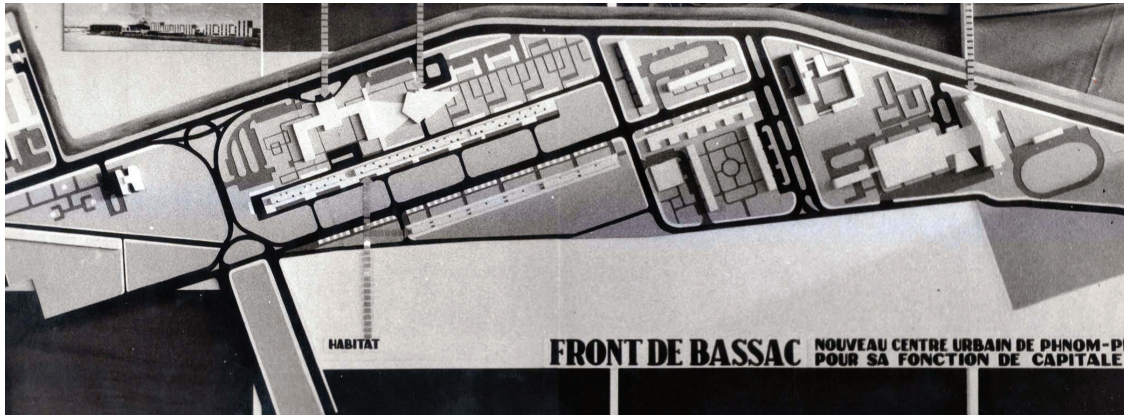


Figure 1:
Master Plan of Bassac River Front Project 1960s. Courtesy of National Archive of Cambodia

theater, a water sports complex, and three apartment buildings, all set in landscaped gardens.

Foreign dignitaries visiting Phnom Penh were regularly taken to visit the precinct as part of an official tour of the capital. The location of the Bassac Riverfront Complex can be understood in relation to the National Sports Complex and the Independence Monument. The three structures are located along the Preah Sihanouk Boulevard, which runs from east to west across the city center.

The White Building (Fig.2) is one of public housing in the large Bassac Riverfront project. The building was designed by the Cambodian architect Lu BanHap under the supervision of architect Vann Molyvann². The building is comprised of six blocks (Fig.3). Each block is connected by an opened staircase allowing the middle corridor to be lit by natural light. The building is about 300 meters in length, laid from North to South and parallels the Bassac river front on the east and the city on the west so people can enjoy both river and city views.

The middle corridor has apartments located on both sides with their main doors facing each other. The white color of the building reflects light into the corridor. The screen wall of the fire staircase,

located in the middle of each block, also produces the dramatic light inside the corridor

The design of each apartment was a combination of modernism and the Khmer idea of living. The apartments are clearly separated into two spaces. Like a Khmer wooden house the living and sleeping areas are the main space, and the cooking and toilet areas are the secondary space (Fig.4). These two spaces are separated by a door to avoid smoke and bad smells from the kitchen and toilet to go into the living space. The opened space at the back allows light and ventilation throughout the apartment. This kind of design was typical in Cambodia in the 1960s which is known as New Khmer Architecture³.

The building was designed on stilts which keeps the ground floor as an open space for multiple activities, parking and to protect from flooding.

The design of the White Building is a smart design in the way that it allows light and ventilation to infiltrate the building. Moreover the use of white color is a smart way to reflect light inside the long, middle corridors. Then raising the building up from the ground and keeping the ground area as the public space is a good way for the city to have more open spaces.

² Helen Grant Ross & Darryl Leon Collins, *Building Cambodia: New Khmer Architecture 1953-1970*, 2006, page 18.

³ "New Khmer Architecture can be characterized by: the use of new construction materials, chiefly reinforced concrete; visual and structural references to pre-existing Cambodian construction techniques, especially elevation of buildings on stilts; a sensitivity to the tropical climate, expressed in creative use of natural airflow and shading; and the sparing use of ornamentation, chiefly bas reliefs inspired by Angkorean temple decorations." The Vann Molyvann Project, www.vannmolyvannproject.org.



Figure 2:
White Building 1960s. Courtesy of Vann Molyvann's collection

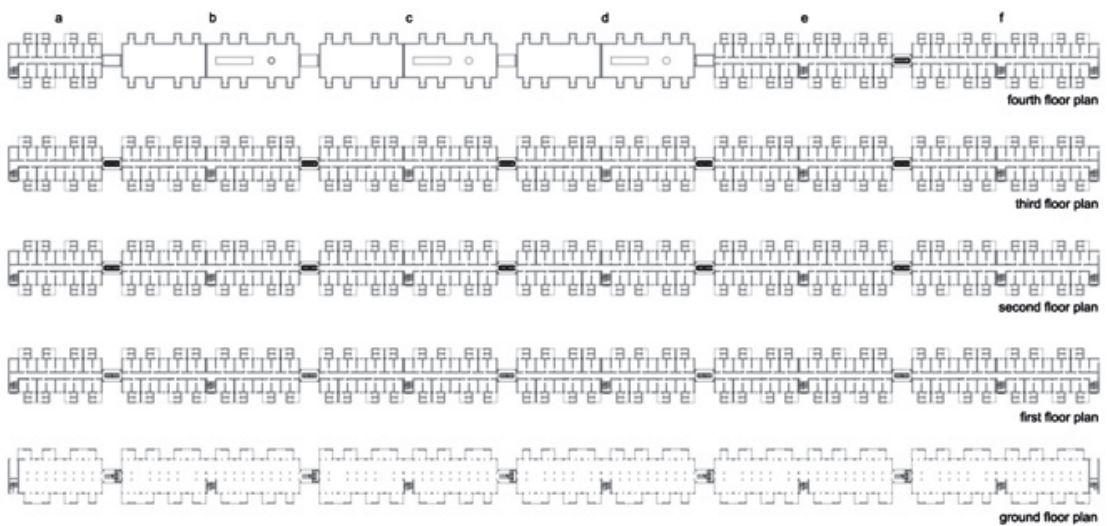


Figure 3:
Floor plans of White Building. Courtesy of the Vann Molyvann Project

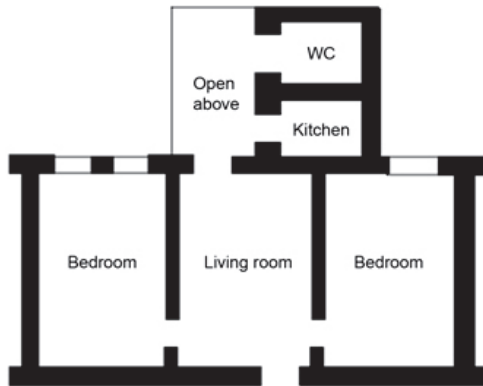


Figure 4:
Typical apartments in White Building. Courtesy of the
Vann Molyvann Project

SMART COMMUNITY

Under Sihanouk's leadership, Phnom Penh had a tremendous transformation in public infrastructure, such as roads, public housing, sport complexes and cultural facilities.

In 1975 when the Khmer Rouge came to Phnom Penh all of the people were forced out to work in the countryside. As with other parts of Phnom Penh the Bassac Riverfront Complex was abandoned.

After the Khmer Rouge in 1979, the Bassac Riverfront Complex has undergone significant alterations with the rush of speculative investment from Korea, China, Singapore and Malaysia. Some structures, such as the Water Sports Complex and the Preah Suramarit National Theater, have not survived. Others, such as the Gray Building, have been significantly renovated, and the White Building has fallen into disrepair. To make a living in the city, the community changed to adapt themselves to the city's transformation.

Phnom Penh city was a ghost city from 1975 to 1979 because people were forced out of the city under the Khmer Rouge. The whole city was almost empty. After Khmer Rouge, people came back to the city and found places to live. As in other parts of the city the White Building was the place where people chose to live. Sok Sovann, 79 years old, and who has lived in the building since 1979, mentioned that



Figure 5:
Google Earth 2014 overlaid by 1960s 2d master plan. Courtesy of Pen Sereypagna

this building was at that time an artists' residents under Ministry of Culture and Information. Two blocks from the north (A & B) was filled by dancers, musicians, artists and film makers. She cleaned the trash and guarded the building at night, she stated, "After Khmer Rouge I came here, I cleaned a lot of trash. They told us to clean the trash around the building area and guarded the stair during night time" (sic). Depending on her for survival some

people, include her family, grew vegetables and banana trees around the building, she mentioned, "There was nothing in front of the building, but only the pine trees and park. At the back and in front area we planted vegetables like eggplant and banana. We didn't have water so we took the water from Gray Building" (sic). This interview with Sok Sovann shows how the community tried to survive in the situation of the city at that time.



Figure 6:
West elevation of block A of White Building. Courtesy of Pen Sereypagna.



Figure 7:
2D section drawing was overlaid by photography. Courtesy of Genealogy of Bassac Project.

An extended family is traditionally Cambodian. The family becomes larger from four people to eight people and up to ten from time to time. For this situation, to live in a one or two bedroom apartments of the White Building is impossible. That is why people have to build-out to make more rooms. The changing of the structures of the building will not be appreciated by people who love modernism architecture and will think the building is a failed project of modernist living, but it is workable for the demands of the community.

People living in the White Building are taxi drivers, police, military, carpenters, artists and so on, making the community of the White Building one of the most vibrant communities in the city. On the ground level of the building there are small markets, cafes, stalls (Fig.8), computer rooms, English classrooms, and storage places. These generate the social economy of the community, unlike the original design of the building of only apartments. The opened staircases become the vertical playgrounds of children and places for the community to hangout. The top level or roof is a horizontal playground and place for events. The corridors are not just for mobility within the building, but also the place for many stalls generating a lively- hood. The new blue water pipes were installed outside the building as the old ones

became broken. The back patio spaces were added on to the original design to meet people's needs. The shrubs that are growing on the surface of building are like a vertical garden (Fig.6).

The original ground floor was designed for protection from flooding and for ventilation, but the area has been transformed into restaurants, markets and cafes. Cafes are not the places for just enjoying soft drinks, but are also used as social places for witnessing, exchanging and circulating information; from one person to others, from young people to old people, and from family stories to political movements.

Thus the community's social economy of the White Building is based on a wide range of informal trades and individual entrepreneurship adapting over time to the changing city

SMART CITY

In 2000s the city's economy increased. Many public areas were privatized. In another part of the city, Dey Krohorm and Sambok Chap communities were the two of the biggest slum areas in Phnom Penh. They were located at the east side of the White Building.



Figure 8:
A stall near opened staircase. Courtesy of White Building Archive.



Figure 9:
One of cafes on the ground floor of White Building. Courtesy of Pen Sereypagna.

Dey Krohorm (Red Soil) was the settlement of 1465 households spread over 4.7 ha of state public land and Sambok Chap (Sparrow's Nest), located further to the east of Dey Krohorm along Bassac river, was an informal settlement of 2890 households⁴. Because of land speculation and redevelopment in the Bassac area, Dey Krohorm was sold to a private company in 2005 and Sambok Chap in 2006. Chum Panith, one of the young people in the community who is studying film at Bophana Center, witnessed the activity of eviction from the government and private company on Dey Krohorm. He remembers that, "About the eviction of Dey Krohorm, at that night I knew about that eviction because before eviction there were many polices around the area. I woke up at 12 am with my friends and I saw many polices. I saw many tractors and many resident households were demolished. I saw people of Dey Krohorm under eviction, they cried. My sister sold the house

before eviction so my family did not get eviction. However I stayed at AZIZA School I saw people get suffers because they did not know anything. And that day was the Chinese New Year so some families went to provinces. They did not know their houses were demolished".(sic) There are many evictions in the city under the form of redevelopment and beautifying the city. What will happen to the White Building, which is well-known as a sex workers and criminals' place, will it survive in the context of surrounding development?

In addition to its vibrant community the White Building is known as a place for sex, crime and the arts. It is unlike the surrounding buildings which include; the national parliament, an office centre, the Naga World casino, the ministry of foreign affair, foreign embassies, shopping malls and other new apartment buildings.

⁴ AbdouMaliq Simone, The politics of the possible: Making urban life in Phnom Penh, Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography, 2008, page 190.



Figure 10:
The current development in Bassac area. Courtesy of Pen Sereypagna

In this current situation the White Building is under threat of eviction and demolition. In early 2015 Phnom Penh municipality made the announcement to demolish the building⁵. This news became the catalyst for outrage by the communities living in the building.

There are several arts institutions based inside the White Building; the SASA art projects, On Photography Cambodia and Cambodia Living Art. There are art programs training the young people in the building. Some young people have trained to be photographers, some to be visual artists and dancers. There are many art events which are organized between art groups inside and outside the building with the White Building residents.

The old master artists have been living in the building since 1979. They perform, create works and teach inside the building. The stairs were painted by the young people and the painting wall shows the commitment and ideas of people living in building (Fig.11). The art events happen every year. The Khmer Classical Dancing on the roof of the building brought people, from both inside and outside the community, together to generate a dialogue of the building's future (Fig.12). It brings opportunities for residents to present the history of the iconic White Building to other people and to articulate themselves into the urban fabric of the city as a collaborative locality

The White Building is the place for learning, teaching, experimenting and producing arts. It is an intersected

place where public and private arts meet, where artists and non-artists generating dialogue, where the arts and communities experience each other.

According to Lyno Vuth, director of SaSa art projects, which is located in the White Building, in UDAYA journal of Khmer Studies, 12, 2014, he described the idea of arts interacting with local people. He said, "Despite changes in our work, one key priority for SaSa art projects is to keep engaging with and learning from local and international collaborations that are locally relevant and that allow meaningful participation from the community with which we work. We are constantly cautious of the fact that ideas must originate from locals, and that they participate in and decide throughout the process from beginning to end: from concept formulation and design to making works and enjoying the results" (p.264).

Boramey is a dancer living in the White Building. She explained how art and other organizations make the community strong and open the opportunity to communicate with national and international communities. 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. Some artists didn't want to stay here so they sold their apartments to other people because there were many outsiders came to live and many informal settlements. It was messy and other people thought that this building was not a good place, the place for sex workers and criminal. When other people asked me where my home is, I didn't tell them because I was embarrass. But now I don't think like that

⁵ Hul Reaksmey and Chan Cheuk Yin, Tenants of White Building in Dark on Demolition, The Cambodia Daily, September 4, 2014.



Figure 11:
Painting on the open staircase of the White Building. Courtesy Pen Sereypagna



Figure 12:
Khmer Classical Dance on the roof top of White Building. Courtesy of Roger Nelson.

anymore because the White Building is well known by many people internationally. People know the White Building through arts now a day. There are many organizations such as SaSa Art Projects, AZIZA school and so on, and many events so that it can transform the White Building condition much better”(sic). This is how arts and community can provide a range of opportunities and supports each other. Art can change the perspective of people living outside the White Building community and can change the perspective of community for the place on which they are living, the White Building; a change of perception, from the place of poverty, drugs, sex workers and crime to the place of art-base communities.

Asean is the fast development contineence. Keeping the poor communities inside the city centres requires a great deal of involvement from government, community and NGOs. To do that it needs engagement and commitment from the community; how can this engagement sustain the social economy of a community in the city as the whole? The White Building did that.

This article is part of a genealogy of the Bassac Project (www.genealogyofbassac.wordpress.com) which maps the transformation of the Bassac area in central Phnom Penh, Cambodia, as a community based, participatory exercise. A key objective is to discover ways to visualize the differences in urban form over time rather than historical continuities, and to characterize urban ruptures through various eras. The mapping exercise takes place within and is informed by the artistic community of Phnom Penh's famous White Building, currently under threat of eviction and demolition. The project aims to learn what is existing now in the Bassac area, and what has occurred in the past, creating a new dialogue which can serve as a basis for ideas about the future of the city. The current urban form can be evaluated in relation to the legacy of its past.

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