

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Research Statement

Soon after Cambodia received independence in 1953, Phnom Penh city had gained a reputation as one of the most beautiful cities in Southeast Asia. Not only was the city well-known for its status as a former colonial city landscaped with colonial architecture, but also for its robust development of new architecture, and the rapid expansion of the city. New architecture in this post-colonial city was unmatched by the newly developed architectures of other countries, because of Phnom Penh's inspiration from modernization, yet connection to the glorious past of the nation. Even though the history of development was surprisingly short as the country gradually entered civil war in 1970, this short history was also an interesting phenomenon because within the 17 years of development there were vast achievements, particularly in construction and architecture.

As the country continually suffered from political instability, war, and, ultimately, the notorious genocide, the old generation had been drastically reduced and replaced by a new generation that has less connection with the past. New developments in the new millennium have seemed to consider personal benefit rather than aspiring for the benefit of the whole society. Lacking conservation and protection legislation, couple with corruption, state properties and heritage buildings have been sold and demolished for new developments without considering historical values of these buildings. New generations have also lost an appreciation for previous aesthetics, as new materials and designs are available easily. Recently, a lot of private buildings have been destroyed or modified, replaced with new aesthetics of banality and short-life materials that offer an easy benefit. However, the historical value of the city has been severely reduced.

Wondering about the history of modern aesthetics in the post-independence period, I conducted substantial self-study in these subject areas. I found that there has been considerable documentation work done on many major buildings. However, there was a lot more work needed to fill the void of the history of the architectural development of the past, particular knowledge about private built forms of the post-independence period. Therefore, my work will look at modern aesthetics in private houses of the 1960s, which I have found that not many people or scholars are interested in. These houses are part of modern architecture and social modernization, and possess equally important values to be explored, as the aesthetics of these detached houses are very distinct from today's architectural style. Their designs are identical to the modernist style of public architecture in the city during the 1960s. Sadly, similar to the fate of the major architectural legacy, and as the houses belong private properties, houses of this style are considered out of date and facing modification and demolition.



Figure 1.1 Houses in Boeung Keng Kang

Therefore, before these houses will be demolished and disappear forever, it would be good if there is some documentation that records and explores the value of them, in relation to the period of modernization in Phnom Penh. Questions arise whether these houses had any connection with the location in which they were built, whether these houses followed the same route of development as public buildings, whether these houses shared some ideology embedded in the built forms of modern architecture, and whether they offered us new perspectives on social modernization during the post-independence period. Unleashing these historical values will thus help to raise awareness and promote appreciation of modern architectural heritage, and hopefully lead to conservation efforts. Having said that, to understand the historical past of the

houses and their connection with the city, we need to look back to the development of the city and the social development during the post-independence period (1953-1975).

1.2 Literature review

Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture' 1953-1970, written by Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins, is regarded as the most well-documented and comprehensive work on modern architecture in Cambodia. Ross and Collins extensively highlight buildings and architects, engineers and related persons, in contributing the development of the newly independent nation of Cambodia during 1960s.¹

One recent study about housing architecture in Cambodia was conducted by Korean researchers on the theme of Southeast Asia Housing Forum. The study identified a housing typology in Cambodia including traditional houses, colonial villas or bungalows, colonial shop houses, modern villas, and modern condominium units. These housing types corresponded to the economic, social and political development of Cambodia, from the French Protectorate, to the post-independence period, and recent housing developments²

1.3 Objectives

This research aims to study the following aspects:

- 1 Analyze the relationship between the urban planning of Boeung Keng Kang and the physical appearance of houses in this location.
- 2 Identify the characteristics of modern private houses of the 1960s within the Boeung Keng Kang neighborhood.

1.4 Research questions

- 1 What is the relationship between the houses and the urban planning?
- 2 How can we classify characteristics of these houses?
- 3 What can be unearthed from the relationship between socio-cultural dimensions and the houses during the 1960s?

¹ Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins, *Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture' 1953-1970*, Bangkok: The Key Publisher Company Limited, 2003.

² "Modern Housing experimentation in Cambodia", *1st Southeast Asia Housing Forum of ARCH*, Korea: Seoul, 6-7 October 2011.

1.5 Benefits of the study

Firstly, this study will help us to:

- Interpret the relationship between modern private architecture and public architecture.
- Explore the relationship of urban settlement and people.
- Interpret the relationship between social modernization and architectural development.

Additionally, the results of this study will also help researchers and the public by:

- Promoting modern architecture in Phnom Penh.
- Raise conservation values, thus saving this architecture from demolition.
- Better understanding of modern architectural movement in Cambodia.
- The findings may reveal pros and cons of house designs in the past which new designers should learn from.

1.6 Hypotheses

Hypotheses for this study are:

1. Modern private houses in Boeung Keng Kang have connections with public buildings that were built during the same time.
2. These houses are the manifestation of modern living of the post-independence period (1953-1975).
3. Urban planning of Boeung Keng Kang had some influences on the design of the houses in the neighborhood.

1.7 Research Approach

Not only architects look at houses as objects of study. There are also other fields of study, such as sociology and anthropology, that look at houses. This research comprises of two approaches: physical aspects of modern private houses in Boeung Keng Kang, and social aspects of social modernization during the post-independence period in which these houses were constructed.

1.8 Methodological Framework

This research is conducted through looking for library resources (reviewing, reading, and summarizing), and fieldwork which included photographing, surveying, and interviewing people. Library research was conducted at the Libraries of Chiang Mai University and the National Archive and National Library of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. The author traveled to Phnom Penh to make his field survey during early 2015.

As expected, it was not possible to access inside the houses for detailed observation. Therefore, the author tried to reach out to friends, and people who work in the construction field, in case they could help. Fortunately, the author had received some well documented surveys of targeted houses from these people, which thus significantly helped this study to be more reliable. These included drawings and photographs.

In photographing these houses, the perspective of camera was kept on the eye level so as to maintain the same format and perspective of the built form. But in some case, as the house was blocked by trees or other objects, the image was made in another way that was possible for capturing the image of house. The image then was projected into 2D elevation, so as to remove vegetation and building blockage. The method of 2D projection was done through a technique called “Model to a photo”. This technique offers better proportional 2D elevation than simply projecting from the front image of a house in 2D elevation.

Interviews with people were also conducted. The author was able to make two interviews. The first was an interview with a house owner, whose name was Neary, who has been living in one concrete house since the 1980s. Although her family was not the original owner of the house, their experiences of living in the house were very useful for this research. The second interview was conducted with an uncle of 70 years age, whose name is Nam Heak. This uncle used to work as an engineer during the 1970s. Today he owns a modern house in Boeung Keng Kang, yet the house is rented to a foreigner. The information from Uncle Nam Heak was very important in highlighting the perspective of people during the 1960s on modern architecture.

This research is arranged in 6 chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the study, the impression, and discussion on the methodological work for implementing this study. Chapter 2 illustrates the historical development of Phnom

Penh, pinpointing to how Boeung Keng Kang was urbanized and became the residential area for modern living. Chapter 3 explains aspects of modernization, such as government policies that worked as the backbone of the movement, the architectural modernization which materialized the ideology of the government, and the social modernization which shows how people's way of living was improved. Chapter 4 presents empirical data that was collected through the field survey, observation, and other sources. Using information illustrated in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 as a lens, Chapter 5 presents an interpretation of this information. Lastly, Chapter 6 presents the summary of the work and implications of the findings, and provides some suggestions for further research.

1.9 Scope and Limitation

This study focuses on the urban space of Boeung Keng Kang and private houses in this area. Boeung Keng Kang is an expanded urban space of the Khmer quarter, which was urbanized during the 1930s. The urban expansion which was implemented during the post-independence period (1953-1975) expanded the area of Boeung Keng Kang making the total area of this sub-district nearly 2.5 square kilometers. Boeung Keng Kang is characterized by an urban grid in which land is divided into plots that are suitable for private houses. The location is enclosed by four boulevards: Mao Tse Tung Blvd on the south, Preah Norodom Sihanouk Blvd on the north, Preah Monivong Blvd on the west, and Preah Norodom Blvd on the east.

Based on my early observation, a number of modern private houses can be found within Boeng Keng Kang. Similarly, research by the Asian Housing Study who studied housing types in Cambodia also suggests that it is the area along Monivong Boulevard in which one could find houses of the modern style of the 1960s.³

Due to the evacuation of urban people to the countryside and the death of people during the Khmer Rouge regime, the loss of official records, and cancelation of property ownership, it was very difficult to identify the year of construction of each house. Therefore, this study will consider houses of the 1960s based on the sense of familiarity of the author. Modern house of the 1960s could be identify by their decorative elements, forms and materials.

³ Ibid

There are a number of houses remain in this area, but due to time constrain and limited effort, this study randomly selects only 20 detached houses. To be more specific, detached houses in traditional style are excluded. Traditional houses are characterized by wooden material, and style that could be identified based on the houses classification by Prak Virak⁴.



Figure 1.2 Location of Boeung Keng Kang in Phnom Penh city

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⁴ PRAK VIRAK, *Wooden House of the Early Twentieth Century: Settlement Patterns, Social Distinction and Ethnicity*. In Francois Tainturier (Ed.), *Wooden Architecture of Cambodia: a disappearing heritage* (Center for Khmer Study, 2006), p. 66.