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# The Shophouse as a Tool for Equitable Urban Development: The Case of Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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THE SHOPHOUSE AS A TOOL FOR EQUITABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT:

THE CASE OF PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

Natalie Weinberger

A THESIS

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## INTRODUCTION

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### **THE SHOPHOUSE IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

The shophouse of Phnom Penh is merely a single manifestation of a regional Asian vernacular, which itself belongs to much larger, global architectural phenomenon. The notion of combining commercial and residential uses into a single building is one that was born out of urban necessity: the need for concentrated shops in proximity to dense residential areas, the need to maximize rents on valuable urban land, and the need for shop owners to keep their expenses as low as possible in order to create viable, profitable businesses. For these simple reasons, we find local interpretations of these dual-use buildings in almost every city in the world, from Amsterdam to Kyoto, Rome to New York.<sup>1</sup> In every case, the synergy and proximity of the commercial and residential uses allowed for dense, culturally rich, and commercially thriving urban centers.

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, Howard. *Asian Shophouses in a Global Perspective.* International Conference of the Evolution and Rehabilitation of the Asian Shophouse. Conference Papers, Day Two. 11 May, 2007.



**FIGURE 1:** A busy city street along the Central Market (*Psar Thmei*), with a view of Phnom Penh's dense, low-rise sea of shophouses. Located in the heart of the commercial city center, the neighborhood pictured here grew up in the 1930s and 1940s. Photograph by *Mediastor's/Alamy*. [http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/countries/cambodia-photos/#cambodia-busy-street\\_2882\\_600x450.jpg](http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/countries/cambodia-photos/#cambodia-busy-street_2882_600x450.jpg)



**FIGURE 2:** A bird's-eye view of a shophouse block, revealing a common urban form found in cities around the world. In Phnom Penh's shophouses, narrow fronts create compact spaces for commercial use on the ground level, with varying levels of occupancy on the residential floors above. Source: <http://www.photoindochina.com/en/photo-gallery/4-cambodia-photo-gallery.html>



What distinguishes the Asian shophouse from this multitude of interpretations, then, is its particular spatial organization of these two uses. The shop occupies the street level where commercial activity has highest real estate value, and the upper levels serve as living quarters, often housing the shop owner, but just as frequently non-affiliated occupants. In order to maximize the density of shops on the street level – and also due to material constraints of the earliest examples in Asia – shophouses have narrow street frontages and deep, elongated rears. They contain various architectural features that make them particularly well suited to the harsh Asian climate, and contain internal courtyards that provide sunlight, ventilation and a useful outdoor space. The shophouses' spread throughout urban Asia is the greatest testament to its extreme efficiency and viability across cultures for both residential and commercial purposes.

#### **PHNOM PENH'S STOCK OF SHOPHOUSES: AN OVERLOOKED ASSET**

Starting in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Phnom Penh shophouse proliferated and evolved hand-in-hand with the specific needs and tastes of its occupants, and according to the economic and social climate of their day. While the architectural style and scale of these shophouses evolved, it was the fundamental typology that remained constant: shophouses provided a dense, mixed-use, and affordable housing supply for the vast majority of the inhabitants of Cambodia's capital city.

This continuity of the shophouse typology persisted in Phnom Penh for a full century – from the arrival of the French in the 1860s straight through until Cambodia's golden age of Independence in the 1950s and 1960s. With the onset of political instability and growing war in the countryside, Phnom Penh became a city under partial siege by the early 1970s, with new construction slowing to a minimum. On April 17, 1975 all activity came to complete, disruptive halt. The victorious Khmer Rouge forces marched through the streets of Phnom Penh, only to

forcibly drive the entire urban population out of the city limits. Phnom Penh became a ghost city – its vast stock of shophouses sitting vacant – for nearly four years that witnessed the death of 1.5 million Cambodians. In 1979, which brought an end to Pol Pot’s rule and the agrarian reform he envisioned, Phnom Penh reassumed its role as the urban heart of Cambodia. It would be another decade, however, until steady construction activity – and a general sense of normalcy in the city – resumed.

While Phnom Penh was sleeping, many of its Asian counterparts were experiencing a period of unprecedented economic growth. This boom transformed their capital cities, regenerating their aged building stocks, the majority of which were comprised of shophouses. In Bangkok, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, urban heritage was sacrificed for the sake of modernization. Phnom Penh, in all of its turmoil, missed the bandwagon. While the Khmer Rouge years were devastating in terms of human life, they had remarkably little impact on the built environment of city, leaving it essentially frozen in its early 1970s state for close to fifteen years, until new construction slowly regained momentum. Unlike its regional neighbors, Phnom Penh today retains its essential character as a traditional Southeast Asian city. In other words, it remains a low-rise, dense, walkable, and culturally vibrant shophouse city.

In many ways, Phnom Penh’s extended economic and building lag was mixed blessing for the city’s stock of shophouses, as well as for those who live within it today. Walking through the city’s historic core – located in the heart of the Duan Penh district just west of the Tonle Sap River – this distinct character and social life of shophouse neighborhoods can be experienced best. Mixed in age, scale, style and condition, a diverse spectrum of shophouses comprise each block. A two-story, colonial shophouse might neighbor its 1960s, four-story descendant – the latter an enlarged, modernized version of the former. Despite this diversity, the urban form created by the agglomeration of this single typology is low but dense, manageable by foot, and

bustling with commercial activity. A single block may contain a barbershop, a women's clothing store, a rice distributor, a wood shop, and a spacious corner restaurant with sidewalk seating. The narrow commercial compartments created on the street level act as incubators for small businesses, mostly run by residents of the neighborhood itself. Small housing units in the upper floors also result in affordable apartments for the households that inhabit them. Life inside of shophouse blocks contains delicate social networks that have been developing since the city was resettled in 1979. Walking through internal courtyards and service alleys, tight-knit communities are prevalent; it is not unlikely to see men playing chess, ladies peeling vegetables, children playing, and people standing around talking.<sup>2</sup>

While the Duan Penh district – encompassing the historic core of Phnom Penh – contains the oldest architectural fabric in the city, the kind of commercial environments, public spaces and tight-knit communities described here can be found throughout the many shophouses neighborhoods of Phnom Penh. Given their multifaceted values, these examples of everyday commercial and domestic architecture ought to be better understood and actively conserved so that they can continue to thrive in years to come.

## **PRESENT-DAY THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Unfortunately, very few people today have a sense of appreciation for Phnom Penh's shophouse heritage, or an understanding of how the design of shophouse neighborhoods promote equity and affordability. The city's shortage of housing has in effect cramped its shophouses to a point of overcapacity and crowding. This has pushed public tastes to the opposite end of the spectrum, as the wealthy elite favor more spacious, suburban models of living. For the first time since their original construction in the 1860s, real threats now challenge

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<sup>2</sup> Grant Ross, Helen. "Re: Phnom Penh Shophouses." Email to the author. 20 Oct. 2009.



**FIGURE 3:**  
The open courtyards and service alleys within shophouse blocks create semi-public/private spaces where local residents mingle.  
*Photograph by the author*



**FIGURE 4:**  
Narrow service alleys provide a number of functions for the community. Residents gain access to a back terrace where they can dry clothing and catch a breath of fresh air. Basic infrastructure, such as water pipes, sewage, and electricity, find efficient access to individual shophouses with their narrow frontages and rears. *Photograph by the author*

the shophouses' prospect for future development: large scale private development and changing tastes in housing have largely excluded shophouse design from significant new additions to Phnom Penh's cityscape. This is also directly linked to the fact that developers – many coming from overseas – are not aiming at middle to low income groups as their target consumers. The costly nature of new construction equates into an economic burden on its initial inhabitants. Without widespread access to mortgage loans, Phnom Penh's low and middle income groups are simply not a profitable clientele for developers. Thus, new construction almost exclusively caters to the wealthy elite, and the city's middle class residents by and large stay put in the existing stock. Given the shortage in supply, the poorest city residents are then forced into informal settlements and living situations, giving Phnom Penh its notorious reputation for mass evictions and resident displacement.

The size and scale of new development projects also create challenges for the existing stock of shophouses throughout Phnom Penh. Dilapidated blocks – due to aging, overcrowding, and undercapitalized occupants - become opportunities for demolition and new construction in the city center. Existing shophouse occupants have little opportunity to invest in their homes or businesses, furthering the cycle of decay. While upgrading schemes are prevalent throughout the city, they target informal slums and squatter settlements, aiming to empower the poorest of the poor. The Municipality of Phnom Penh does not address the great need for improving the conditions of much of its existing building stock.

As Phnom Penh's urban population continues to swell over the course of the next decades, planners, politicians, architects, and NGO's need find a feasible strategy to provide housing not only the urban poor, but the growing middle class. Healthy housing markets contain a clear spectrum of housing affordability, and given the current state of development in Phnom Penh, there are few signs that private markets will supply median income housing on its own

accord. By and large, shophouses at present serve the broad reaches of Phnom Penh's middle-class residents. They also "contain certain architectural and urban attributes of organization and location that make them potentially useful for contemporary cities, in which migration from the countryside is increasing and requiring strategies for the integration of migrants into the urban economy."<sup>3</sup> Phnom Penh's stock of shophouses is an important asset for the city's health, yet one that is largely overlooked by those who aim to improve it. Phnom Penh's shophouses will not find their way into the development agenda unless their inherent values are first recognized.

To provide a sense of the extent to which the issue of shophouse development in Phnom Penh has already been researched, a review of relevant literature – and in some areas the lack thereof – is provided for context. Next, a detailed overview of the origin, development, and evolution of the shophouse is put forward to place the city's existing challenges into larger perspective. Chapter Three takes a technical look into the spatial organization of the Phnom Penh shophouse in all of its forms, additionally tracking the evolution of architectural elements and styles throughout its one-hundred year continuous development. Above and beyond spelling out the history and evolution of this building type, opportunities and recommendations for the active conservation of Phnom Penh's shophouses – both in their physical form and conceptual design – are finally presented.

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<sup>3</sup> Davis, Howard. "Asian Shophouses in a Global Perspective." International Conference of the Evolution and Rehabilitation of the Asian Shophouse. Conference Papers, Day Two. 11 May, 2007.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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The last thirty years of scholarly research devoted to Cambodia's capital city have been strongly biased to the recent past, and rightfully so. After a period as devastating as the one experienced in Cambodia from 1975-1979, issues of post-conflict rebuilding, human rights, and basic development needs most certainly merit all the attention they can get. It is understandable, then, why such notable gaps in the city's pre-Khmer Rouge scholarly attentions exist, and even further why a movement to preserve Phnom Penh's urban heritage is a fledgling, secondary effort.

Given the paucity of research into Phnom Penh's diverse urban heritage, it is logical that the built legacies of Phnom Penh's French colonial past and traditional Khmer buildings would take precedence over everyday, vernacular architecture that is so widespread throughout the city. Grand colonial villas and ornate Khmer pagodas remain at the top of the conservation agenda both for their visibility within the cityscape and economic potential through redevelopment. Consequently, the sea of vernacular architecture – and in the case of Phnom

Penh its shophouses – remains largely overlooked by historians, conservators, and city residents alike.

In researching the history and development of the shophouse in Phnom Penh, one is hard-pressed to find resources or studies dedicated solely to this topic. While some significant research has been conducted over the course of the last decade, it is also necessary to throw a wider net in trying to understand the history, evolution, and present-day challenges associated with their hypothetical conservation. This requires a look beyond the urban history of Cambodia into the available literature throughout the Asian region, where literature concerning city-specific manifestations of shophouse neighborhoods is abundant.

Unlike Phnom Penh's urban heritage, however, the subject of urban upgrading has received considerable attention in recent decades. With housing and shelter considered as basic needs, writing on the subject has flourished, making Phnom Penh a popular case study for cities around the world for its application of upgrading as a means to combating wide-scale urban poverty. While no comprehensive study focuses on upgrading issues as specific to Phnom Penh's stock of shophouses, many reports discuss the benefits, best practices and new approaches to facilitating upgrading schemes.

## **THE ASIAN SHOPHOUSE**

Only in recent years has the shophouse emerged as a subject of interest, scholarship, and advocacy within the greater conservation community of Asia. In May of 2007, the *International Conference on the Evolution and Rehabilitation of the Asian Shophouse* was held in Hong Kong, the first of its kind dedicated solely to the origin, morphology, and redevelopment



of the shophouse in urban Asia.<sup>4</sup> Hosted by UNESCO, the ICCROM-Asian Academy for Heritage Management, and the Antiquities and Monuments Office of Hong Kong, speakers shared case studies of city-specific shophouse evolution and their associated conservation challenges, ranging from Bangkok to Hanoi, Macao to Singapore. While the conference provided a great sampling of case studies and best practices, the shophouses of Phnom Penh found no place on the program. Despite this lack of attention, the research gathered for this event helps to paint a better picture of the shophouse in global perspective, as well as its regional morphology and spread throughout Asia.

Similar to this regional conference, almost all comprehensive studies on shophouse evolution and conservation have been specific to an individual city or district, thus lacking specialized insight on Phnom Penh's own respective stock. Nevertheless, these studies are immensely informative given what they share with Phnom Penh: their shophouse districts often developed contemporaneously, they retain much of their character and urban form after years of reinvention, and face comparable conservation and redevelopment challenges today. Shophouse studies have been conducted for neighborhoods in Hanoi, Hoi An, Bangkok, Malacca, and Penang, to name a few.

Singapore – despite having lost the majority of its shophouses during its 1970s construction boom – has been extremely proactive in documenting and conserving those that remain. Much has been written on the subject from the perspective of historians, conservators, and real estate developers alike. For example, Lee Ho Yin's "The Singapore Shophouse: An Anglo-Chinese Urban Vernacular,"<sup>5</sup> provides in tremendous detail the historical and demographic context that set the scene for the introduction of shophouse construction in

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<sup>4</sup> *The International Conference on the Evolution and Rehabilitation of the Asian Shophouse*. Hong Kong, 11 May 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Yin, Lee Ho, "The Singapore Shophouse: An Anglo-Chinese Urban Vernacular," *Asia's Old Dwellings: Tradition, Resilience, and Change*, ed. Ronald G. Knapp, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 115-134.

Singapore. Yin's research follows the spread of this construction and building type, tracking the evolution of shophouse styles from colonial to art deco, ending with the 1960s minimalist style. While the Singapore shophouse is most certainly its own distinct, regional interpretation of the urban vernacular, this evolution in particular parallels the one undergone in Phnom Penh, making this case study notably informative.

Another study from a preservation planning perspective highlights the main objectives and outcomes of Singapore's urban conservation policy.<sup>6</sup> This analysis tracks the effectiveness of historic district zoning, comparing patterns of occupancy, restoration, and vacancy in the city's three shophouse districts. By identifying changes in land use and rates of restoration activity, the study aimed to measure not only the level to which architectural fabric was preserved, but also to what extent the activities which reflect the community life of these shophouse neighborhoods was retained. The outcome of the report – as well as its nature as a follow-up, evaluative study – illustrates the success of Singapore's shophouse conservation efforts. In view of fast economic growth and rapid urban development, the author argues that success was possible due to the fact that the policy allowed for the operation of market forces, thus making the preservation and restoration of the shophouses viable. Many see Singapore's success as a model to be emulated in attracting commercial investment to other historic urban areas in Asia.

"Penang's Shophouse Culture" written by Patricia Fels in 1994, is perhaps the strongest advocacy work of all these studies.<sup>7</sup> Her research – based on three years of living and working in the heart of the Malaysian city – first provides a historical overview of shophouse development in Penang, which retains one of the oldest intact shophouse neighborhoods in Southeast Asia. Fels goes on to discuss the threats associated with this vernacular landscape, citing lack of

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<sup>6</sup> Lee, Sim Loo. "Urban Conservation Policy and the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Heritage: The case of Singapore" *Cities*, 13.6 (1996): 399-409.

<sup>7</sup> Fels, Patricia Tusa. "Penang, Malaysia -- Penang's Shophouse Culture." *Places*, 9.1 (2004): 46-76.

owner maintenance, large-scale urban redevelopment, and an overall lack of appreciation for shophouse architecture. Her argument defending their conservation rests upon the notion that Penang's shophouse neighborhoods "offer intriguing lessons for how conservation can be coupled with economic and social stability."<sup>8</sup>

Revitalization and policy studies for shophouse districts – and for neighborhoods rich in other kinds of urban heritage – also prove useful in light of this research question. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has been particularly proactive in this regard, conducting a comparative study of urban revitalization scenarios by means of heritage conservation in Hanoi, Jakarta, and Manila.<sup>9</sup> While this study focuses on the broader challenges faced by Asian cities attempting neighborhood conservation rather than the particulars as related to one architectural style, it offers much insight on organizational and political frameworks for successful revitalization.

## **THE SHOPHOUSE IN PHNOM PENH**

While no comprehensive Phnom Penh shophouse study has yet to be executed, that is not to say the topic has not received any attention. On the contrary, a diverse collection of focused studies – from a wide spectrum of fields and in a number of different languages – have already been conducted. While some of these sources invest their attention solely on the shophouses of Phnom Penh, others simply pass their mention in historical accounts of the city's development, in news articles concerning urban heritage, or as a component to larger urban planning schemes for the city.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 48.

<sup>9</sup> Steinberg, Florian. Urban Revitalization Scenarios: Ha Noi, Jakarta, and Manila." *Revitalization of Historic Inner-City Areas in Asia: The Potential for Urban Renewal in Ha Noi, Jakarta, and Manila*. Asian Development Bank, 2008. 31-44.

Michel Igout's *Phnom Penh Then and Now* is the most comprehensive book on the capital's urban and architectural history, providing both an historical account of the city's development as well as an impressive collection of maps and historic photographs.<sup>10</sup> Igout defines the main stages in the urbanization of the city, from its foundation in the 15th century and rebirth during the reign of King Norodom, to the modern capital that developed after independence and the changes following in the years from 1975 to 1993. Within this historical account, Igout provides much detail about shophouse construction within the Chinese commercial quarter, explaining the economic, environmental, and cultural forces that influenced their proliferation.

Architectural documentation has been the most popular approach to studying Phnom Penh's shophouses. The first notable study of this kind was conducted by the *Bureau des Affaires Urbaines* (BAU), which was created in 1993 within the Municipality of Phnom Penh with funding from the City of Paris to provide an overview of urban planning concerns. Published under the title of *Phnom Penh; Développement Urbain et Patrimoine* (Phnom Penh: Urban Development and Heritage), their 1997 book makes an impressively detailed assessment of the historic character of the city, with recommendations for urban design and planning measures. Included are pages of renderings, photographs, and commentary on Phnom Penh's diverse stock of shophouses.<sup>11</sup> Ten years later, a technical study conducted by a group of Japanese architects took this documentation a step further, analyzing the space formation of fifty-five shophouses in the Duan Penh district.<sup>12</sup> Through a field survey of thirty blocks, the group documented the formation of lots and alleys, presenting a series drawings illustrating these patterns in their final report. Taken with a handful of other shophouse documentation studies, there is already ample

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<sup>10</sup> Igout, Michel. *Phnom Penh Then and Now*. Bangkok : White Lotus, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> French Ministry of Culture, Department of International Affairs. *Phnom Penh: Développement Urbain et Patrimoine*. Paris : Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Shirasishi, Hideo and Yoshihisa Wakita. "Considerations on Space Organization of Shophouse and Block Formation in Phnom Penh, Cambodia". *Journal of Architecture and Planning*, No. 616 (2007): 7-14.

material for technical reference for any sort of shophouse conservation scheme in Phnom Penh.

William Chapman's article "Too Little, Too Late? Urban Planning and Conservation in Phnom Penh, Cambodia" offers one of the few critical assessments of the city's remaining heritage.<sup>13</sup> After discussing Phnom Penh's layered history and how it is reflected in physical fabric of the city, Chapman concludes that Cambodia's most recent wave of development is the main threat to retain the city's charm and sense of place. Nevertheless, "Phnom Penh has the chance to preserve its striking colonial *and* indigenous heritage, and to use this preservation for rational economic and political ends."<sup>14</sup> Chapman calls upon Cambodian citizens and political leaders alike to act as the advocates and agents for this preservation.

While very little associated literature is available, the recent implementation of a neighborhood conservation district in Battambang – the second largest city in Cambodia – serves as a fantastic resource for any potential conservation of vernacular heritage in Phnom Penh.<sup>15</sup> Having significant urban heritage both in good condition and worthy of preservation, Battambang's "Master Plan of 2004" integrates urban heritage into its larger land use framework. The European Union, the German Development Service (DED), and the Konrad Adenauer Foundations are providing both financial help and capacity building for this pioneer project. It can be expected that as progress continues with conservation plans, associated studies will become available.

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<sup>13</sup> Chapman, William. "Too Little, Too Late? Urban Planning and Conservation in Phnom Penh, Cambodia." *The Disappearing 'Asian' City: Protecting Asia's Urban Heritage in a Globalizing World*. Edi: William S. Logan. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2002. 35-50.

<sup>14</sup> Chapman. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Battambang Heritage Preservation Initiative Online. Web. 11 Feb. 2010.  
<<http://www.battambang-heritage.org/welcome.htm>>

## URBAN UPRGRADING

Urban upgrading is neither a novel concept in academic scholarship nor a new planning tool in real-world practice. The notion of self-help, in-situ slum upgrading gained popularity in the 1970s and 1980s in response to an era of slum clearance by national governments in the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> By the mid 1980s, however, the adequacy of upgrading projects as a sole strategy began to meet considerable criticism on both macro and micro levels. The inadequate framework for conducting wide-scale urban lending, paired with the many inefficiencies created by individual, community-based upgrading projects influenced policy makers to move away from this model and towards a new generation of all-encompassing city development strategies.

Despite this major shift in theory and practice, evaluations of past upgrading projects proved more positive than expected. By the 1990s, upgrading experienced somewhat of a renaissance, especially in Asia and Latin America. Since then, experience has shown that slum upgrading projects are associated with substantial social and economic benefits, in that people obtain an improved, healthy and secure living environment without being displaced. Today, the best resource for practitioners is “Upgrading Urban Communities,” an online resource that tracks and evaluates the growing experience of upgrading projects around the world.<sup>17</sup> Cambodia is no exception to this trend; today, upgrading schemes are the most successful means of bringing adequate housing and services to the growing urban poor population.

The scale and success of upgrading projects in Phnom Penh have made it one of the premier case studies of its kind in the Asian region. For this reason, an abundance of articles and reports are available for analysis and review of methodological approaches, challenges, and

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<sup>16</sup> Gulyani, Sumila and Genevieve Connors. *Urban Upgrading in Africa: A Summary of Rapid Assessment in Ten Countries*. The World Bank, Africa Infrastructure Department: June, 2002. 4.

<sup>17</sup> “What is Urban Upgrading?” Upgrading Urban Communities: A Resource for Practitioners. 2001. Web. 19 Mar. 2010. < <http://web.mit.edu/urbanupgrading/upgrading/whatis/what-is.html#Anchor-What-41312> >

outcomes of associated upgrading schemes.

The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, a regional network of grassroots community organizations, NGO's and professionals actively involved with urban poor development processes in Asian cities, is the main player in Phnom Penh's arena of housing programs for the urban poor. In 1998, they set up the Urban Poor Development Fund (UPDF) as a joint venture of Phnom Penh's network of community savings groups, the Municipality of Phnom Penh and the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. UPDF has since then published a number of reports profiling Phnom Penh's urban poor settlements and its active work in empowering these communities. One such study, "The Urban Poor Development Fund in Cambodia: Supporting Local and Citywide development,"<sup>18</sup> provides an overview of the organization's evolution, key activities, and main environmental and economic issues they face today. While the upgrading schemes executed by UPDF are in no way specific to shophouses in particular, this information provides a foundation on which a new upgrading scheme specifically for this type of vernacular heritage could be built.

While research has yet to be conducted joining the goals of heritage conservation, neighborhood revitalization, upgrading and resident retention specifically in Phnom Penh, this nexus is slowly gaining speed within the larger community of preservationists working in the developing world. Perhaps the most progressive and recognized of these actors is the Historic Cities Programme of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, which has been lauded for its work in Darb Al-Ahmar, Cairo. The 2005 Project Brief explains the organization's approach in stimulating revitalization without displacing residents, and on the contrary, providing new opportunities in the community by means of micro-credit for small businesses and home improvements. The fundamental belief behind the project is that no aspect of development can be treated in

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<sup>18</sup> Phonphakdee, Somsak and Sok Visal. "The Urban Poor Development Fund in Cambodia: Supporting Local and Citywide Development." *Environment & Urbanization*, 21.2 (2009): 569-586.

isolation from the others, making this scheme a model for sustainable community development by means of heritage conservation.<sup>19</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Much has been written about each of the individual thematic components that define this thesis question. Despite their clear interconnectedness and relevancy, however, a comprehensive study of the history and evolution Phnom Penh's shophouses as well as a written form of recognition about their inherent urban value remains to be written. Connecting this argument in favor of their conservation with recommendations for their conservation and for new construction will help connect the urban heritage argument to the larger development agenda in Phnom Penh.

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<sup>19</sup> Aga Khan Trust for Culture. "2005 Project Brief: Al Azhar Park, Cairo and the Revitalization of Darb Al-Ahmar." 2005. Web. Jan. 27, 2010. < [http://www.akdn.org/publications/2007\\_aktc\\_egypt.pdf](http://www.akdn.org/publications/2007_aktc_egypt.pdf) >



## HISTORIC OVERVIEW

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In its modern urban form, Phnom Penh is relatively a little younger than Singapore and a little older than Kuala Lumpur.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the course of its history, its population has been in a state of constant flux, with all the while the built environment evolving as it responded to the resulting changing pressures and demands. From the establishment of a French Protectorate over Cambodia in 1863, to the city's golden era of independence in the 1960s, through the devastating Khmer Rouge years and up until the present, one thing remained constant: the ebb and flow of population and associated building booms was closely reflected in the vernacular built environment. It is thus possible to 'read' Phnom Penh's history today as a series of overlays, all of which are embedded in its urban heritage. In particular, the shophouse – Phnom Penh's predominant building block and a typology common through Southeast Asian urban centers – both enabled and exemplified this growth over the course of the past 150 years.

Chinese immigrants played an integral role in the city's development starting long before the French arrival in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Providing the commercial backbone of the

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<sup>20</sup> Osborne, Milton. *Phnom Penh: A Cultural and Literary History*. Oxford: Signal Books Limited, 2008. Xii.

city, they were also responsible for the introduction of shophouses – the mixed-use, masonry buildings that started to appear on the urban landscape at the same time as the establishment of the French Protectorate. With a strong demand for housing, and a corresponding need to build fireproof, sturdy buildings, the French called on the Chinese shopkeepers to build sustainable constructions. It was not in the Cambodian mentality to build in such a way, as typical vernacular buildings were constructed solely of wood, elevated on stilts, and essentially better suited for rural living. Shophouses were built for permanence, density, affordability, and harmony with the local climate.<sup>21</sup> Since this initial catalyst over one hundred years ago, the shophouse has thrived in Phnom Penh; the physical proof is imbedded in the fabric of countless styles and reinterpretations of this building type found throughout the city.

Rather than summarize Phnom Penh's urban development and evolution in its entirety, this overview aims to focus specifically on the morphology of the shophouse over the course of Phnom Penh's modern history.

## **EARLY ROOTS**

Phnom Penh's emergence as the capital city in the fifteenth century was inherently linked to its location at the confluence of the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers.<sup>22</sup> Archaeological research proves that this development dates back much further – perhaps as long ago as two thousand years – to early settlements located on land just high enough above the water level of the annual floods. By the fourteenth century, a small but growing commercial settlement sat at the modern site of Phnom Penh. The growing population of the city – estimated anywhere between one and ten-thousand inhabitants by the 15<sup>th</sup> century – reflected the fact that leaders

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<sup>21</sup> Grant Ross, Helen. "Re: Phnom Penh Shophouses." Email to the author. 20 Oct. 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Osborne, 19.

of the Angkorian Empire were looking to expand their trade with China as a means to sustain their prosperity.<sup>23</sup> From the port at Phnom Penh, ocean-faring ships owned by Malay and Batavian trade companies could sail down the Mekong River through the South China Sea, and on to meet China.<sup>24</sup>

The city did not acquire its modern name until the Cambodian court left Angkor to resettle at the site of Phnom Penh in the mid-fifteenth century. While the court would relocate once again after just thirty years, Phnom Penh remained a modest commercial center trading with the Chinese to the East and up-river to Laos. The city only came into European awareness in the sixteenth century, when Phnom Penh was briefly linked to the Spanish and Portuguese empires.<sup>25</sup> This period of nearly one hundred years of Iberian endeavor in Cambodia can be ultimately summarized as a failed effort on behalf of Spanish and Portuguese tradesmen to shape the course of the country's history.<sup>26</sup>

During this period – and more precisely in 1620 – Portuguese seafarers made the earliest recognition of a distinct Chinese neighborhood in Phnom Penh. Many of these early Chinese were emigrants who had first moved to North Vietnam and later settled in Cambodia. When they did so, they tended to quickly assimilate into Cambodian culture.<sup>27</sup> This community, which was comprised almost entirely of men who took Cambodian women as wives, adopted Khmer lifestyles, and lived in Cambodian style houses. In line with the traditional economy at that time – characterized by agriculture and fishing – the Chinese leased farms and lots with which they actively participate in local commerce and make a living. The Sino-Khmer

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Molyvann, Vann. *Modern Khmer Cities*. Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2003. 151.

<sup>25</sup> Osborne, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>27</sup> Edwards, Penny. "Time Travels: Locating *Xinyimin* (New Migrants) in Sino-Cambodian Histories." *Globalizing Chinese Migration: Trends in Europe and Asia*. Ed: Pal Nyíri and Igor Saveliev. Burlington, UK: Ashgate Press, 2002. 255.

community, which emerged as a result of intermarriage, cohabitated with the existing Cambodian population rather than forming its own separate and distinct group. This early population of emigrants – unlike their successors in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century – assimilated into a traditional Cambodian lifestyle both economically and socially.<sup>28</sup>

From the 1600s to the 1800s, Cambodia remained a popular destination for Chinese immigrants despite the somewhat violent and unstable nature of the period in Southeast Asia. Chinese immigrants – comprised largely by political refugees who had fled collapsed dynasties at home – found a land that was resource rich, crowd-free, and absent of the natural disasters they were accustomed to back home in Southern China during this period. Settlement in Cambodia was a financially attractive opportunity, and the Chinese population continued to grow.<sup>29</sup>

It was not until 1859 that a detailed description of Phnom Penh was recorded, just before it fell under French control in 1863. Henri Mouhot, the French explorer credited with ‘discovering’ Angkor, described the city during a brief visit as “the great bazaar of Cambodia,” noting that of the 10,000 people living on land, almost all were Chinese. Twice that number, he recorded, were the Cambodian and Vietnamese communities living on boats along the Tonle Sap River.<sup>30</sup> While scholars doubt the accuracy of Mouhot’s exaggerated estimations of the population size of the city, it is accepted that by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese population in Phnom Penh had grown to an extent that they were beyond graceful assimilation. They were a distinct community living a distinct lifestyle – and their presence would increasingly influence the direction of urban growth over the course of the coming century with the arrival of the French Protectorate in Cambodia in 1865, just six years after Mouhot’s writings.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Osborne, 45-46.

## **A FRENCH PROTECTORATE OVER CAMBODIA**

King Norodom himself opened doors to the French to establish a protectorate over Cambodia in 1863. By 1865, Phnom Penh once again assumed the role of the nation's capital and center of royal power after a 360-year hiatus since the Cambodian seat left in 1505. King Norodom, under the recommendation and influence of France's representative in Cambodia, naval commander Doudart de Lagrée, moved the capital from its previous site in Oudong to Phnom Penh, and began construction on a new Royal Palace in 1866. These masonry buildings – a break from the former wooden palaces of the past – symbolized the start of the modern history of the country's new capital. At this time, the largest group in Phnom Penh was the Chinese, and their dominance would persist for decades to come. Cambodians comprised roughly one quarter of the total population, and the remainder was made up of various ethnic groups including Vietnamese, Siamese, Malays, Indians and Filipinos.<sup>31</sup>

The built environment of the city began to see its first signs of change during this decade. Development was concentrated along the waterfront of the Tonle Sap, stretching close to four kilometers long, north to south. Most buildings along this major road were built of bamboo and timber, but by 1866 masonry constructions began to appear and proliferate. While it remains impossible to prove that these initial structures were indeed the earliest shophouses to arise in Phnom Penh, the matter is extremely likely given that just ten years later, the first record of their existence was noted.

The rapid rate of population growth in Phnom Penh during the first years of King Norodom's reign equated into a significant shortage of housing, as an estimated 10,000 inhabitants moved to the city in a single decade. To respond to this demand, Norodom hired the French contractor Le Faucheur in 1872 to construct three hundred concrete Chinese

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 57.

shophouses, known as *compartiments Chinois*, which would be rented to Chinese traders at high prices. Phnom Penh became infiltrated with rapid construction activity, as “an army of woodcutters, workmen and bricklayers, as well as a crowd of handcarts and buffalo-driven wagons, enlivened the city.”<sup>32</sup> In a description of the cityscape at the same time, the French naval officer Louis Delaporte commented on the ever-growing number of brick buildings.<sup>33</sup> This would be the first wave of shophouse construction and the first glimpse of the modern city taking shape.

The emergence of distinct ethnic districts that appeared between 1866 and 1890 was another factor that also had a significant impact on the future layout of the city during the first half of Norodom’s reign. A rough apportioning of space according to ethnic identity began to be visible, although it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that strict town planning would require the rigid implementation of ethnic districts, which persisted well until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The Chinese assembled in the central part of the capital along the riverside. This was the most commercially active part of town and centrally located for easy access from other quarters of the city. The Cambodians assembled to the south around the newly constructed Royal Palace. To the north, between Wat Phnom and the River, the French concentrated their administrative offices.<sup>34</sup> As the city made a slow but steady course of growth during these decades, these districts began to define themselves, becoming increasingly apparent and visible.

Despite the appearance of shophouses and emergence of ethnic districts, several factors served as a major barrier to Phnom Penh’s growth in the 1860s through the 1880s. The system of land ownership blocked all initiatives for expansion and new construction except for those that were backed by the King, who owned and controlled all land. Secondly, the French Protectorate was in no position to embark on a construction boom of its own; the number of

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<sup>32</sup> Igout, Michel. *Phnom Penh Then and Now*. Bangkok: White Lotus, 1993. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Osborne, 60.

<sup>34</sup> Igout, 7.

civil servants in Phnom Penh was few, and the financial resources of the administration were inadequate.<sup>35</sup> As a result, urban infrastructure also remained absent – there was no garbage collection or drinking water, and house fires and flooding were frequent.<sup>36</sup>

Under a formal threat from France in 1884, King Norodom accepted a new convention redefining the Protectorate's influence and power over Cambodia, which saw the introduction of a new system of land ownership and the creation of public and private property in Cambodia.<sup>37</sup> Most notably, the Municipality of Phnom Penh was created to provide much needed financial administration and urban management. As the King's influence waned, formal town planning could finally be applied to the growing capital city. Four years later in 1889, a new *Résident-Supérieur* of Cambodia was appointed who would become responsible for the rapid transformation of Phnom Penh in the coming years. Huyn de Vernville, an efficient French administrator, became the strict manager and planning visionary for the city.<sup>38</sup> When de Vernville arrived, the population of Phnom Penh was somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000 inhabitants. Phnom Penh at this time was a linear city, following the contour of the riverside. Expanding west to accommodate the growing population was an obvious priority for de Vernville, but it was first necessary to drain the plain by digging a semi-circular canal around the French quarter. The material from this digging was in turn used for filling in any *boengs* (lakes) which could be found on the soon to be developed land. This process of digging canals and filling in lakes would become the model for further land area expansion for the remainder of Phnom Penh's modern history.

Following the draining of the plain, De Vernville laid out a grid of new roads and grand boulevards, and widened the Grand Rue, establishing much of the pre-independence street

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Osborne, 71-72.

<sup>38</sup> Igout, 8.

pattern during the 1890s. Along these new roads he built hundreds of masonry shophouses to provide a combination of housing with commercial activity on the street level. Despite the growing number of brick buildings, however, many older wood structures remained until a great fire seized the city in May of 1894. This disaster pushed Norodom and the Municipality to ensure that all new construction in central Phnom Penh was erected in fireproof masonry; the mandate would trigger the continuous construction of shophouses for seventy years to follow.

“Everywhere, with the King’s support, the *Résident-Supérieur* built for permanence, improved sanitation, and generally developed the capital.”<sup>39</sup> When de Vernville left his posting in 1897, Phnom Penh had changed significantly in its physical form, but also in its demographic makeup. The overall population had doubled since his arrival in 1889, to roughly 50,000 inhabitants of which 22,000 were Chinese. In 1895, the first water supply system was established, and three years a sewage disposal system was introduced. In 1901, an electric power station was set up, providing the city with street lighting. Under the direction of de Vernville, Phnom Penh transformed into a healthier, considerably more attractive city during a single decade at the tail end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw great shifts in leadership within both French and Khmer ruling bodies, setting the stage for the continuing transformation of Phnom Penh’s built environment and the ongoing evolution of the shophouse.<sup>40</sup> Following de Vernville as *Résident-Supérieur* was Jean Marie de Lanessan. At the royal throne, King Sisowath would precede his brother, Norodom, after his death in 1904. From the end of Norodom’s reign until 1914, Phnom Penh experienced growth in all directions, expanding at the highest rate in the Chinese and Cambodian quarters.<sup>41</sup> Development spread west from the river to Boulevard Tou Samuth and

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<sup>39</sup> Igout, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Osborne, 77.

<sup>41</sup> Igout, 10.





**FIGURE 5:** A continuous row of first-generation, two-story shophouses in Phnom Penh. While the date of this photograph is unknown, these shophouses were most likely a product of one of the city's first significant building booms in the late 19th century under the reign of King Norodom. *Source: National Archives of Cambodia.*

to the south reaching the Bassac River along the patterns established by the French. During this time, the Protectorate solidified its control over the city's development by collecting taxes, creating schools, and filling in more of the lakes, known as *boengs* in Khmer, that stood in the way of new development. By this stage in the city's development, investors favored shophouse-style apartment buildings to European construction.<sup>42</sup>

In 1923 a new Indo-China Urbanization Directorate was formed, which was to be led by town planner Ernest Hébrard. This second era of grand planning and development was inspired by an experimental approach on behalf of the French towards city planning, who were exploring new methods of urban planning abroad. In line with this framework, Hébrard devised a comprehensive master plan for Phnom Penh that would dramatically expand the land area of the city, utilizing space for its best urban geographical use. In 1924, he published this urban proposal under the title '*Plan d'Extension de la Ville de Phnom-Penh.*' This new leadership would also formally define and reinforce the preexisting ethnic districts, creating in essence a more hierarchical city.<sup>43</sup>

In the 1930s, the Chinese quarter was chosen by Hébrard as the site for the construction of the new Grand Market (*Psar Thmei*), one of the largest public buildings that remain standing today. By placing the market near the existing Chinese Quarter – the longtime commercial center of the city - the Protectorate aimed to control trade by means of taxation.<sup>44</sup> Erected between 1935 and 1937, the market is one the architectural gems of the city, despite the fact that it was ill received at the time of its completion. This domed, reinforced concrete structure is one of the city's finest examples of art deco design, and still retains its original function.

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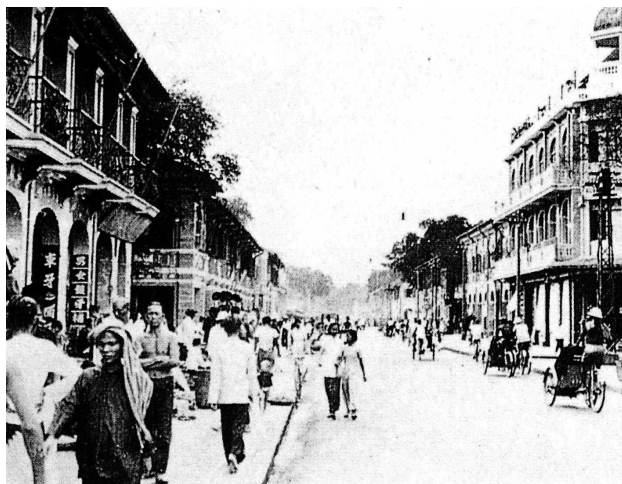
<sup>42</sup> Edwards, Penny. *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*. University of Hawaii Press, 2007. 58.

<sup>43</sup> Igout, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



**FIGURE 6:** Aerial view of the Central Market (*Psar Thmei*) and the newly built streets and constructions around it, photographed in the 1940s. Ernest Hébrard's '*Plan d'Extension de la Ville de Phnom-Penh*' relied in the shophouse as one of its main mechanisms for urban expansion. *Source: Phnom Penh Then and Now. 147.*



**FIGURE 7:** The busy An Eng Street, located in the commercial Chinese Quarter, in 1940. The Hotel International, right, is still standing today. *Source: Phnom Penh Then and Now. 126.*

The First World War and the Great Depression had surprisingly little influence on the steady building pattern of Phnom Penh. On the contrary, during this period and under the reigns of Sisowath and Monivong, Phnom Penh grew into a city that would come to be seen as one of the most attractive capitals in the region, referred to by some as the ‘pearl of Asia.’<sup>45</sup> The filling in of the canals, the laying out of beaux arts style axial boulevards, and the further proliferation of uniform blocks of shophouses - all which took place during Hébrard’s leadership and before the Second World War - continue to define the cityscape of Phnom Penh today.

In contrast to this period, the years of the Second World War and their immediate aftermath until Independence in 1953 saw very little new construction or change to Phnom Penh’s built environment. Considering that many of the first generation shophouses were built at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by one half of a century later this housing stock was beginning to age substantially. The once-attractive inner city – which contained Phnom Penh’s oldest shophouses and public buildings built by the French – fell into a state of poor condition and general disrepair.<sup>46</sup> As journalist Patrick Donovan recounted in a 1949 article in *The Scotsman*, Phnom Penh, “once as clean and swept as a French housewife’s kitchen is now sinking into dusty oriental squalor.”<sup>47</sup>

The pressure on the building stock was further heightened by the influx of population over the years between 1939 and 1953. The fast growing population during the last years of French presence in Cambodia placed even more pressure on the already dilapidated stock of shophouses. Recorded at 108,000 inhabitants in 1939, the population increased more than three-fold in just ten years, reaching 354,000 in 1950. The city-center – comprised almost entirely of shophouses – remained the most concentrated of the city’s neighborhoods, with a

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<sup>45</sup> Osborne, 90.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 113.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 118.

population density estimated at 300 inhabitants per square kilometer.<sup>48</sup> A crowded, aging Phnom Penh set the scene for the complete transformation of the cityscape in the 1950s and 1960s during the reign of King Norodom Sihanouk.

### **GOLDEN AGE OF INDEPENDENCE**

In November of 1953 King Norodom Sihanouk successfully achieved independence for Cambodia and the French finally conceded to end their ninety-year protectorate over the country. During the immediate years following independence until the mid 1960s, Phnom Penh experienced a sudden surge in construction – one that would consciously aim to achieve a sense of national and urban identity through architecture for the first time in the city’s history. These years were also a time of rapid population growth – characterized partially by the spatial growth of the city following the roads and boulevards laid out in earlier plans – but more so by the densification of housing in the pre-existing blocks in the city center, which was largely engulfed by the Chinese Quarter. This was achieved through the regeneration of the built environment through the demolition of two-story, colonial shophouses, which were replaced by multi-story, concrete apartment buildings. These were essentially constructed as individual shophouses combined into a single building. In almost all cases, the essential elements which define the shophouse typology – their pattern of long, narrow lots, spaces for small shops on the street level, and small housing units on the upper floors – were preserved through this reinterpretation, allowing for increased density without abandoning the commercial character of the neighborhood.

Where new development took place at the periphery of the city, a policy mandated that much of this new construction be limited to modern versions of the city’s traditional Chinese

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<sup>48</sup> Igout, 15.



**FIGURE 8:** Multi-story 1960s shophouse apartments.  
*Photograph by the author.*



**FIGURE 9:** A 1960s apartment complex spanning the limits of an entire urban block. Despite the developer-built nature of this building, many of the essential elements of the shophouse remain, most notably the compact commercial spaces along the street.  
*Photograph by the author.*

shophouses – three and four story apartment buildings in uniform style – and can be found on present day Boulevards Kampuchea Vietnam, Achar Hemcheay, Pokambor, and Keo Mony.<sup>49</sup> This new supply of housing was intended to accommodate the growing middle class, and the design lent itself to the efficient use of space and the creation of affordable, mixed use developments where local businesses could thrive on the ground floor street level.

According to Milton Osborne’s account, in 1959 the city’s architectural and demographic make-up still reflected the tripartite division that had come into effect with the arrival of the French in Cambodia in 1863.<sup>50</sup> In essence, this meant that the original ‘*quartiers*’ – European, Cambodian, and Chinese – could still be identified, even if they weren’t as clearly defined as they had been in colonial times. At this time, the Chinese population represented about one third of the overall inhabitants living in the city.<sup>51</sup> The first half of the 1960s saw tremendous growth in Phnom Penh: most of the empty land along the airport was now occupied, and major new public buildings had been constructed following a burst of government investment.<sup>52</sup> During this first decade of independence, Phnom Penh experienced its first building boom since before the Second World War, and one that has yet to be rivaled.

By the late 1960s, the era of post-independence good feeling – as well as Sihanouk’s control over Cambodia – would come to an abrupt halt. Between 1969 and 1973, Republic of Vietnam and U.S. forces bombed and briefly invaded Cambodia in an effort to disrupt the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge, the radical social reform party that aimed to create a purely agrarian-based, Communist society in Cambodia. With the war in the countryside growing in intensity by 1972, Phnom Penh had already become a city under partial siege.<sup>53</sup> Refugees fleeing this fighting

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<sup>49</sup> Igout, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Osborne, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 136.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>53</sup> Osborne, 13.

began flocking to the city, straining its resources with the sudden influx of urban population. Signs of instability emerged, as major government buildings were ringed with barbed wire and sandbags. By 1975, the city's population had swelled to more than two million inhabitants, and the Khmer Rouge had gained enough power and proximity to Phnom Penh to execute random artillery attacks that tore into the city.<sup>54</sup> Phnom Penh had swelled in population to a point where settlement had become 'spontaneous,' with squatter housing beginning to appear along the city's periphery, in public gardens, on roads, sidewalks, and on the roofs of buildings.<sup>55</sup> In the words of Milton Osborne, "before killing the town, the Khmer Rouge had caused its population to explode."<sup>56</sup>

#### **1975-1979 KHMER ROUGE + THE VACANT CITY**

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of April, 1975, the five-year civil war between Cambodia's ruling regime and a Communist insurgency finally came to an end. That same day, the victorious Khmer Rouge troops marched into Phnom Penh, with instructions to evacuate the entire population. Their ideal was an agrarian communist state with peasant values, and consequently, the literate urban population was the main target of their reform. The evacuation of the city took place over four or five days, as troops forcibly and quickly emptied Phnom Penh of most of its two million inhabitants. Once deported to the countryside, they were combined with the local population and subjected to forced labor. About 1.5 million Cambodians are estimated to have died in waves of murder, torture, and starvation, aimed particularly at the educated and intellectual elite.<sup>57</sup>

All in all, the extent of physical destruction within Phnom Penh's center during this time

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>55</sup> Igout, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Osborne, 148 – 156.



was limited. The city's most symbolic buildings were spared, including the National Museum, the Royal Palace, and the Grand Market. The vernacular cityscape – mainly speaking the vast stock of shophouses – was also generally untouched by Khmer Rouge forces operating out of the capital. Given the nature of the evacuation as an agrarian reform, the Cambodian communists now had an entire country to govern, and in this sense the empty capital city was of low priority.<sup>58</sup> As William Chapman put it, “The period under Pol Pot (1975-9) was devastating in terms of human life, but had a relatively small impact on the physical shape of the capital city.”<sup>59</sup>

Three years, eight months, and twenty days after the initial insurgence of Khmer Rouge troops into Phnom Penh, Vietnamese armed forces invaded Cambodia, capturing Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979. One day after Phnom Penh was liberated from Pol Pot's control, a new government was established under the name of the Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Council. As the period of genocide came to an end, refugees began to return to the city from the countryside in large swaths. They began to resettle into a city that was void of any basic services, infrastructure, and sense of order in general.

## **1980 – PRESENT: POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION**

By 1981, large sections of the city remained devoid of any inhabitants. The majority of new city residents came from rural towns and villages, resettling into the preexisting built fabric of Phnom Penh. Housing was designated on a first-come first-serve basis, placing incomplete households arbitrarily throughout the French villas, shophouses, 1960s apartment complexes, and any open space where makeshift housing could be constructed, including rooftop

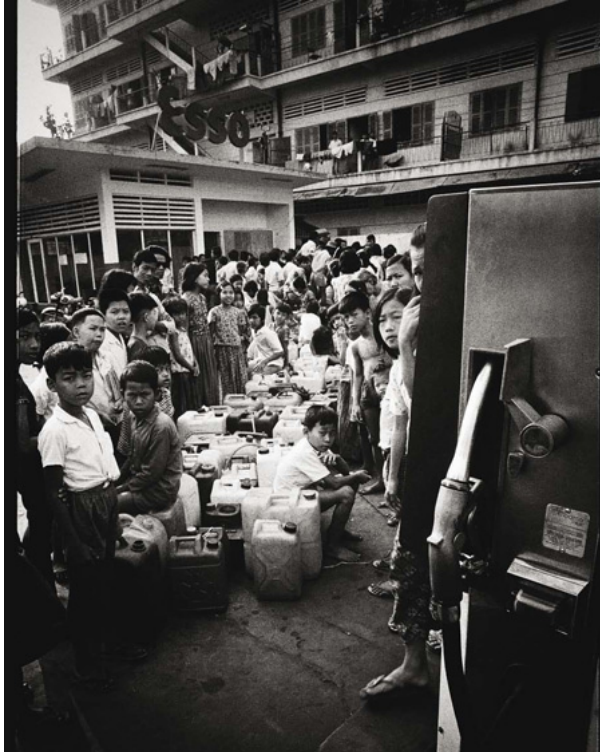
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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 153.

<sup>59</sup> Chapman, William. “Too Little, Too Late? Urban Planning and Conservation in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.” *The Disappearing 'Asian' City: Protecting Asia's Urban Heritage in a Globalizing World*. Ed: William S. Logan. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2002. 35.



**FIGURE 10:**  
Phnom Penh after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. Relatively untouched shophouses are visible in the background.  
*Source: [http://kaosradioaustin.org/gallery2/main.php?g2\\_itemId=544](http://kaosradioaustin.org/gallery2/main.php?g2_itemId=544)*



**FIGURE 11:**  
Residents wait in line for water, as the city lacked basic services and infrastructure after sitting vacant for almost four years.  
*Photograph by Roland Neveu, <http://mag.ttoasia.net/roland-neveu-fall-phnom-penh/>*

settlements. The city grew from 700,000 to 1.5 million inhabitants in a period of just five years, doubling in size without any major introduction of citywide infrastructure.<sup>60</sup>

During the socialist regimes of the 1970s and 1980s, private ownership of land was forbidden as it was incompatible with socialist policy. It would not be until 1989 when private property was reborn in Cambodia. This was culminated in the 1992 Land Law, which set out general principles of land tenure. Since 1990, the country has gone from having the vast majority of all property owned by the government to having nearly all property in private hands. The aforementioned Land Law includes "provisions for proprietorship, temporary possession, authorization to cultivate land, right of use, and rights to carry mortgages and loans."<sup>61</sup>

Despite the legal framework, many households in Phnom Penh who have customary ownership do not in fact have the paperwork to prove so. The process to acquire legal title for formal housing can take months and can be very costly for low-income households. For this reason, it's likely that many shophouse residents – despite having lived in the same home for thirty years – may not actually have proof of ownership. This lack of proper registration in turn can serve as one of the greatest barriers for the upward mobility of residents and the general development of existing neighborhoods. Without title, residents cannot apply for loans or mortgages, and therefore become more vulnerable to land disputes and evictions.

Up until the global financial crisis, Cambodia's housing market was soaring. The capital's most sought after locations attracted speculators, and prices reached US\$500 per square meter in 2000, but were sold at around US\$4,000 or more per square meter along the city's main boulevard, and US\$2,500 per square meter in the expatriate-dominated neighborhood of Boeung Keng Kang. In mid-2008, this bubble burst. The global financial crisis hit Cambodia's

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<sup>60</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *Land Management: Structure and Organization*. 2006. Web. 2 Feb. 2010. <<http://www.fao.org/docrep/009/a0306t/A0306T08.htm>>

<sup>61</sup> Stough, Patrick. "Historic Preservation in Southeast Asia: the Role of Public-Private Partnerships." *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*, May, 2006.

biggest investors, who began pulling out foreign assets, and real estate sales plummeted 30% to 50% from a year earlier.<sup>62</sup> This booming era of high real estate values and foreign speculation came hand-in-hand with an increase of squatter settlements, evictions and a major decentralization of the urban poor out from the city center, often to government funded relocation sites. Many ambitious plans for high-rise apartments and satellite urban developments are far behind schedule, while small-scale and infill construction continues throughout the city.

Phnom Penh's housing supply is becoming increasingly inadequate to meet the needs of its growing population. The extensive stock of shophouses built to accommodate the incremental increase in housing demand over the course of its history has aged considerably, as there is little to no access to finance for low and mid income groups to put toward home improvements. In some locations, buildings that were designed and constructed in the 1960s for the growing middle class are now Phnom Penh's worst squatter slums.<sup>63</sup> With an expected urban growth rate of 4%,<sup>64</sup> Phnom Penh has once again reached a point where major additions to its housing supply are critical. For the first time in the capital's history, almost all large scale urban planning schemes put forth by the Municipality of Phnom Penh and private developers alike<sup>65</sup> neglect to utilize the shophouse as the building block in creating dense, affordable, and commercially viable neighborhoods.

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<sup>62</sup>"Foreign Ownership Mull'd Anew." Global Property Guide. 23 Oct, 2008. Web. 2 Feb. 2010. <<http://www.globalpropertyguide.com/Asia/Cambodia>>

<sup>63</sup> Osborne, 24.

<sup>64</sup> The Municipality of Phnom Penh. "Project of The Development Master Plan of Phnom Penh." Web. 24 Feb. 2010. <[http://www.phnompenh.gov.kh/english/Master\\_Plans/Project\\_DMPP.htm](http://www.phnompenh.gov.kh/english/Master_Plans/Project_DMPP.htm)>

<sup>65</sup> Many large-scale housing and mixed-use developments are currently under construction in and around Phnom Penh, including Camko City, the Grand Phnom Penh International City, and De Castle Royal Condominium Development.



**FIGURE 12:**

Sorya Shopping Center, currently the largest modern shopping complex in Cambodia, sits side-by-side with traditional shophouses in the Duan Penh District.

Source: <http://picasaweb.google.com/lh/photo/52c7M9K4BdFSki2q7nvd8A>



**FIGURE 13:** Evidence of demolished shophouses are often embedded like fossils on walls of neighboring buildings. The process of demolition and infill construction is how Phnom Penh has continuously regenerated itself.

*Photograph by the author.*

## SHOPHOUSE TYPOLOGY

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The history and evolution of the shophouse in Phnom Penh is a central aspect of the city's history, yet one that is inherently difficult to study. Like most forms of vernacular architecture, knowledge of shophouse construction was achieved by a process of trial and error, with new innovations subsequently passed down informally from generation to generation. This pattern of inheritance came to an abrupt halt during the Khmer Rouge era, as the vast majority of Phnom Penh's residents did not survive the genocide, and with few of those who did choosing to resettle in the capital. This upheaval of Phnom Penh's longstanding inhabitants – many who called themselves 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> generation city residents – meant that much of their inherited local knowledge was lost. This most certainly encompassed shophouse history and evolution, leaving few with a deep knowledge, understanding, or appreciation of what had been Phnom Penh's predominant building type for a continuous century.

Despite these gaps, piecing together scholarship and literature from other shophouse-rich countries in Southeast Asia – namely Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia – proves to be an extremely insightful method in revealing potential shophouse origins and morphology in Phnom

Penh, which likely followed a timeline and history similar to that of its regional counterparts. Combining these resources with first-hand observations of Phnom Penh's diverse and remarkably intact stock of shophouses enables a deeper understanding of the urban vernacular story particular to Cambodia's capital city.

The shophouse is not only important for our understanding the city's growth and evolution, but also how many neighborhoods continue to function today. Taking a close look first at the individual elements that define the shophouse typology, then their stylistic and material evolution over the years, a deeper understanding of the shophouse story as particular to Phnom Penh can be understood.

#### **COMBINING THE COMMERCIAL & THE RESIDENTIAL**

Simply put, the shophouse is a hybrid urban building form that combines the commercial and the residential. The architectural concept and design of this combined working-living space is the defining feature of the shophouse typology. Space could be partitioned accordingly depending on the number of stories within the building; the earliest, single-story shophouses reserved the front space for a small shop or business, using the back space for private living. In shophouses of two or more stories – the more common scenario – the entire ground floor has been typically reserved for commercial use with living space in the floors above.

The spatial formation of the shophouse is characterized by narrow street fronts and deep rears, which extend in length backwards into the interior of the block, creating elongated rectangular lots. This formation is thought to have originated from the limited length of timber beams in Hanoi, which determined the maximum width of constructions.<sup>66</sup> While there are no

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<sup>66</sup> Verrot, Michel. Personal Interview. 8 Jan. 2010.

records to confirm if this was the case during the earliest constructions of shophouses in Phnom Penh, their massing retains these distinctive long and narrow qualities.

Shophouses are generally low-rise buildings, as the narrow lot widths do not easily accommodate heights beyond five or six stories. Their nature as an urban vernacular building type means that they are designed for density; to conserve valuable urban land, shophouses are constructed side-by-side, and when built contemporaneously, they often share party walls. This formation of continuous construction creates an urban street wall with commercial shops lining the ground level. In the treatment of corner shophouses, façades are often orientated towards the intersection, meaning that instead of meeting at a sharp right angle, they form a more fluid curve along the corner, leaving ample open space on the street level for pedestrian life, street vendors or restaurant seating.

Shophouses with arcades— known to have originated in Malaysia – are likely to be found along primary roads, whereas narrower secondary or tertiary streets could not accommodate such an amenity.<sup>67</sup> This element functions as circulation space for pedestrians along an arcade formed at the frontage of the shophouses, creating an interesting feature of urban design that is also sensitive to the local tropical climate.<sup>68</sup> Within Phnom Penh, this is illustrated most clearly around the perimeter of the Central Market, where an arcade way covers pedestrians from heavy monsoon rain and provides shade from the scorching heat of the mid-day sun.

The arcade is not the only shophouse design element that caters to the extreme Southeast Asian weather. Façades are typically punctured with ventilation openings that permit both natural light and air circulation through the building. These functional fanlights often take their form as a decorative features, which can be seen from the street and contribute to the

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<sup>67</sup> Hartono, Soehardi. "The Pre-War Shophouses of Medan: Its Development and Prospect of Conservation." *International Conference on the Evolution and Rehabilitation of the Asian Shophouse*. Hong Kong, 11 May, 2007. 13.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

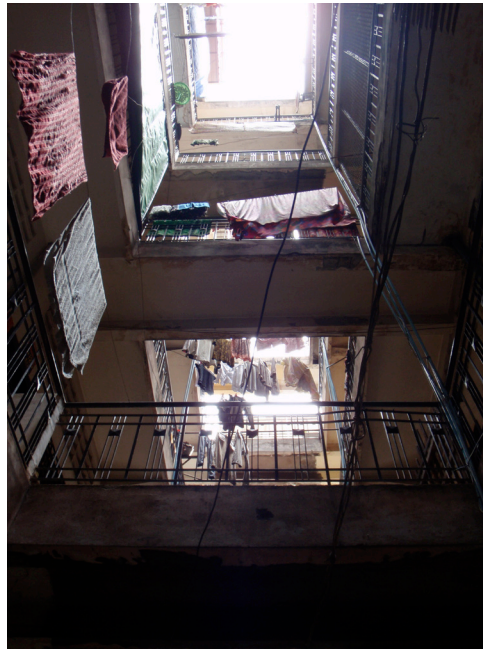




**FIGURE 14:**  
The continuous street façade of modern shophouses creates an urban street wall. *Photo by the author.*



**FIGURE 15:**  
Shop owners use compact street level commercial spaces to their maximum efficiency. *Photo by the author.*



**FIGURE 16:**  
Much needed light floods  
through an interior well,  
also providing ventilation.  
*Photo by the author.*



**FIGURE 17:**  
Decorative ventilation openings  
puncture shophouse façades,  
permitting natural light and air  
circulation. Pictured here is the  
back alley entrance of a mid-  
century shophouse. *Photo by the  
author.*

appearance of the façade. Upper floor terraces also provide a semi public/private space, where residents can enjoy fresh air, hang laundry to dry, and grow plants. The spaces in between shophouses form networks of internal service alleys and courtyards, which also function as air and light wells in the middle of houses and a rear courts.

As Soehardi Hartono describes the shophouses of Medan, Indonesia, “the human scale of the shophouse rows, their fine façade ornamentations and continuous street façade together with their high intensity of usage provided a unique vitality to the Chinese quarter.”<sup>69</sup> This regional vernacular most certainly created a similar urban environment in Phnom Penh, resulting in a neighborhood of dense, mixed-use fabric that provided the heart of Phnom Penh in the historic Chinese commercial quarter, and continues to do so today. While their construction here dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term ‘shophouse’ did not actually come into common use until the 1950s.<sup>70</sup> Under the French Protectorate, shophouses were previously referred to as ‘*compartiments Chinois*.’

## **SHOPHOUSE ORIGINS + EVOLUTION IN PHNOM PENH**

While the exact origins of the shophouse are unknown, some scholars presume that “... the idea of the old shophouses could have originated from the various types of old shophouse design in Batavia, Calcutta and Madras.”<sup>71</sup> Others point to the commercial row house commonly found in Guangzhou and other southern Chinese coastal cities as the inspiration for Chinese living abroad, who brought this familiar urban vernacular building form with them as they resettled throughout Southeast Asia. While it is impossible to pin-point exactly when and where

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ismail, Wan Hashimah and Shuhana Shamsuddin. “The Old Shophouse as Part of the Malaysian Urban Heritage: The Current Dilemma.” *The 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Asian Planning Schools Association*. Sep, 2005. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

the shophouse originated, it is generally accepted that it was a hybrid building form that combined its essential elements with local materials, climate, and labor skills as it spread across Southeast Asia.

In Phnom Penh, the building type is associated with the minority urban Chinese population of Phnom Penh – natives of southern China, many of whom came south through Vietnam before settling in Cambodia.<sup>72</sup> Learning from the effectiveness of Hanoi’s shophouses (sometimes referred to as “tubular houses”) as the functional combination of trading/dwelling units, Phnom Penh’s Chinese population developed a similar typology of shophouses for their fledgling settlement in Cambodia. Here, the shophouse reflects the migration history of the Chinese population and their role in the city building process. They reflect both the building traditions and the working and living habits of their inhabitants.

While the typology of the shophouse remained in essence the same during the century of their continuous construction, the style, scale and materials remained as variables which allowed the building type to evolve, making today’s stock richly diverse and varied in form. This evolution can be summarized in five distinctive periods of the city’s growth: the earliest era of shophouse construction upon the arrival of the French, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century building boom under the direction of King Norodom, the expansion of Phnom Penh towards the West where the art deco style flourished, the post-Independence period of large-scale shophouse apartments, and lastly the post-conflict years of reconstruction up until the present. By highlighting the changes that took hold of the city’s built environment – both stylistically and in terms of scale and materials – the essential elements that define the shophouse become even more apparent.

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<sup>72</sup> Edwards, Penny. “Time Travels: Locating *Xinyimin* (New Migrants) in Sino-Cambodian Histories.” *Globalizing Chinese Migration: Trends in Europe and Asia*. Ed: Pal Nyíri and Igor Saveliev. Burlington, UK: Ashgate Press, 2002. 255.

Phnom Penh's foremost shophouses during the early French colonial period were humble masonry constructions with pitched roofs and clay tiles. In this early stage of their architectural development from the 1860s to the 1880s, they were likely just one to two stories high, with second floor windows made of simple louvered timber shutters. During these elementary years, shophouses were most likely void of detailed ornamentation or stylized design, as the labor to support their construction was a fledgling force, and the financial support from the King and French Protectorate was not yet present.

By the next period of Phnom Penh's growth, however, the physical form of the city began to undergo dramatic changes. While the shophouse remained as the central mechanism of this momentum, the efficiency, craftsmanship, and aesthetics of the building form advanced. Upon King Norodom's mandate, newly erected shophouses had to cater to the high population density and strong commercial life of the Chinese Quarter, all the while becoming more resistant to fire, which had devastated much of the first generation of shophouses that employed timber in their construction. These disasters paved the way to a more permanent shophouse prototype, as new buildings were to be constructed of brick with tiled roofs and masonry foundations.

According to a photograph illustrating this period obtained from the Cambodian National Archives, Chinese characters appeared at the frontal beam carrying the second storey façade which informed the name of the shops or trading firms and other supporting business information. More stylized façades also grew in popularity as enabled by the elevated economic status of their Chinese merchant owners. While the precise sources of these ornamental designs is unknown,

the decorative styles that typified the façades of Malaysian old shophouses were built from memory or based on copybooks of styles found in parts of southern China, where European revivalist influence played a major role. The nouveau riche in both the emerging Malaysian towns and the treaty ports of

southern China (among them Canton, Amoy, Foochow-Fu, Ningpo and Shanghai which had come under British jurisdiction in 1842) were attracted to stylistic interpretations of European architecture."<sup>73</sup>

While it is impossible to confirm that Phnom Penh's builders followed the same trend as recorded in Malaysia, one can presume so based on photographs depicting the appearance of shophouse façades from this era.

The next notable chapter in the shophouse's evolution in Phnom Penh came with the ambitious French town planner Ernest Hébrard, who drafted plans to expand the growing city towards the West. Exemplified by the design and construction of the Central Market, which was completed in 1937, art deco gradually became the dominant aesthetic force among new construction – both for shophouses and other buildings types.

"The emergence of a new worldwide trend in architectural design: Art Deco, was formally introduced by the *Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industrielles Moderne* held in 1925. Unlike all its predecessors whose stylistic designs were anchored in the Classical past, the aesthetics of Art Deco architecture looked radically to the future by drawing design inspirations from cars, ocean liners, and aeroplanes."<sup>74</sup>

Freshly trained French architects coming to Cambodia were most certainly aware of this global trend, and their introduction of Art Deco to Phnom Penh eventually found its way to the city's shophouses. In the remaining fabric from this period, we can see that ornamentation was in the form of simple geometrical motifs at the capitals, and that windows were sometimes shaded by thin, cantilevered horizontal fins, a feature made possible by the use of reinforced concrete construction that was beginning to gain widespread use in the 1930s. The treatment of corner buildings also changed: instead of segmented curve comprised of three flat planes, a true, round curve could be constructed thanks to malleability of reinforced concrete.

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<sup>73</sup> Ismail, Wan Hashimah and Shuhana Shamsuddin, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Yin, Lee Ho. "The Making of the Singapore Shophouse." *International Conference on the Evolution and Rehabilitation of the Asian Shophouse*. Hong Kong, 11 May, 2007. 8.



**FIGURE 18:** These two-story colonial, pitched-roof shophouses are representative of the permanent prototype which replaced its fire-prone counterpart at the turn of the 19th Century. Masonry foundations, brick walls, and tiled roofs ensured durability. *Photo by the author.*



**FIGURE 19:** An art deco shophouse apartment building from the 1930s or 1940s. Thin, cantilevered horizontal fins shade the windows, a feature made possible by the use of reinforced concrete construction that was beginning to gain widespread use in the 1930s. *Photo by the author.*

After a lull in construction during the late 1940s, the period after Cambodia gained Independence under King Norodom Sihanouk saw the greatest expansion the city has witnessed to this day. In the 1950s, planners seemed to understand from Phnom Penh's past that the shophouse was the building typology they could rely on as they ambitiously designed the future city. By demolishing first and second generation shophouses, but mainly by building on vacant land, builders constructed large-scale interpretations of the typical shophouse in the form of multi-story concrete apartment buildings, in which the ground floor retained its commercial use and subdivisions into small units for small businesses. Although describing contemporary shophouses that were built in Indonesia at the time, Hoyin describes the aesthetic approach as applied to shophouses during the same era Phnom Penh's 'golden age of Independence':

The spirit of Modern Movement in architecture which considered ornamentation as a crime and emphasized the use of strong geometrical lines and box-like shapes apparently began to pervade the outlook of both urban blocks. Thus no decorative elements were to be found at the façade, instead big glazed openings to allow more penetration of sun lights and rectangular shapes dominating the façade. Expressive lines and shapes emerged as eye-catching elements of the corner buildings of these shop house blocks."<sup>75</sup>

Looking at Phnom Penh's post-independence, modern shophouses today, this description proves to be extremely relevant. While this era of the city's heritage is the most common, most recent, and for these reasons the most overlooked, it may have the greatest potential for value recognition as it becomes more historic over time. Given the widespread interpretation of modernism – paired with the booming economic and cultural life of recently independent Cambodia – this urban heritage encapsulates a remarkable moment in the nation's history, and one that induces great nostalgia for those who are able to remember it.

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<sup>75</sup> Hartono, Soehardi. "The Pre-War Shophouses of Medan: Its Development and Prospect of Conservation." *International Conference on the Evolution and Rehabilitation of the Asian Shophouse*. Hong Kong, 11 May, 2007.16.





**FIGURE 20:** Corner buildings from the 1960s consistently take on a perfectly curved form. This provides ample space for pedestrians on the sidewalk and even creates a safer traffic environment on the street. *Photo by the author.*



**FIGURE 21:** Winding stairwells serve as a shared space in multi-story shophouse apartments. *Photo by the author.*

Hand-in-hand with rising political instability and fighting in the country, the history of the shophouse took a hiatus from 1975-1979 as its inhabitants were forcibly removed from the city. New construction in Phnom Penh that had somewhat resumed by the late 1980s marked the start of the shophouse's next phase in evolution, but also the first real departure from its role as the city's building block.

### **PRESENT DAY THREATS TO THE URBAN VERNACULAR**

The most recent construction of post-modern shophouse developments pose great threat to the defining element of the building type – the combination of the residential and commercial under the same roof, and the easy street-access to small, distinct commercial spaces. While the most recent period of economic growth has enabled new construction throughout the city for the first time in decades, those who are wealthy enough to finance it rarely incorporate commercial space into their homes, even when in the form of infill construction on a shophouse block. Gated, developer-built “shophouse” communities – while resembling the traditional urban vernacular type in appearance – largely fail to combine these two uses, and if they do, often combine the ground level commercial spaces to accommodate a large, chain business. Combined with the introduction of high-rise residential construction and large-scale shopping malls, the shophouse faces its first major threat since it began to thrive in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The shophouses of Phnom Penh comprise the vast majority of the city's urban heritage, and do so as a result of their carefully evolved typology and adaptation to local materials, climate, and labor. The residents of Phnom Penh today inherit these shophouses because they were built to last, and have clearly stood the test time, both in their fabric and in the continued viability of their design. In the words of Patricia Tusa Fels, shophouses “...are integral to a way

of life in which small-scale workplaces, shops and residences are located near (sometimes even above or behind) each other, and they comprise an image unique to Southeast Asia.”<sup>76</sup> Compared to its Southeast Asian counterparts, Phnom Penh retains a remarkably varied stock of intact shophouses ranging from every era of their evolution except for their first generation of construction. If modern planners and developers were to look into Phnom Penh’s urban history, the importance and value of the shophouse both in terms of cultural heritage and urban sustainability would be understood.

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<sup>76</sup> Fels, Patricia Tusa. “Conserving the Shophouse City.” *The Penang Story – International Conference 2002*, Penang, Malaysia: 18-21 Apr. 2002. 3.



**FIGURE 22:**

New high-rise construction is the most visible threat to the wide spread shophouse typology. Rising thirty-two stories high, the now complete Canada Bank Tower typifies this new trend in urban development, breaking from Phnom Penh's past as a low-rise city. *Source: <http://www.photoindochina.com/en/photo-gallery/photogallery/1669-central-market.html>*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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Phnom Penh's shophouses are both an integral building block of the existing city as well as an urban design concept worth promoting for equitable future development. By their very nature, these vernacular buildings are durable, complementary to the Cambodian climate, affordable both to construct and to live in, and supportive of small, locally owned businesses. Further, their agglomeration results in an urban form that encourages viable, tight-knit communities and social networks within a city notorious for its lack of social and economic inclusion across income levels.

Despite these inherent strengths, the shophouses of Phnom Penh face numerous threats in both their conservation and viability as a model for new construction after more than a century of continuous building and evolution. Despite their years of abandonment during the Khmer Rouge era and immediate influx of population during the post-conflict resettlement of the city, the first major threat jeopardizing their integrity is the unchecked development resulting from Cambodia's quickly growing economy. Chain supermarkets, shopping malls, and high-rise residential buildings have all become more frequent replacements for blocks once

comprised of continuous shophouses. Foreign investment and big business have permeated the city, and the physical consequences of these changes are most immediately visible in the increasing rate of demolition and the introduction of new, high-rise development in the characteristically low-rise city.

As for the significantly large stock of shophouses that do remain, a lack of maintenance and the associated pressing need for wide-scale retrofitting and upgrading is blatantly apparent. At the root of this lack in owner stewardship is a disconnect between middle and low-income groups with access to credit with which to finance home improvement and upgrading projects. As the urban population has significantly increased over the course of the past three decades, shophouses have been modified time and again to accommodate the influx of households eager to live in the city center, and willing to live in crowded quarters to do so. This over capacity has put even more pressure on an already aging housing stock, and paired with the costly nature of major renovations and upgrading, many shophouses have fallen into a state of disrepair and dilapidation.

In order to provide recommendations aimed at conserving and upgrading Phnom Penh's shophouses – as well as to promote their viability as a model for new development and construction as the city expands in years to come – it is first crucial to understand the legal and financial constraints facing the city's current housing finance and construction markets. Both the legal framework for land rights and the existing heritage conservation policies and their associated limitations provide the groundwork for any viable and realistic plans for healthy urban development in the future.



**FIGURE 23:** This 1960s shop/office has built-in, small shopfronts in its ground level that open to the street. While not technically a shophouse due to the absence of residential space, this adaptation borrows many of the valuable elements, and should be encouraged. *Photo by the author.*



**FIGURE 24:** Across the street from the building pictured above sits this late 1980s office building. Note the barred windows on the ground level, and lack of individual commercial spaces. While resembling its neighbor in appearance, this single-use building sets an example for planning and architectural practices to avoid. *Photo by the author.*

## EXISTING POLICIES AND PLANNING AGENDA

Land law, property rights, and urban land use planning form a complex and precarious terrain in present-day, post Khmer Rouge Phnom Penh. Unlike neighboring Thailand and Vietnam, Cambodia has no formal housing support systems – no Housing Board, no Ministry of Housing, and no real estate tax. There is very little housing finance for any income bracket, and the Municipality of Phnom Penh, overburdened with other challenges facing the city, has in general had difficulty responding to the needs of its growing population.<sup>77</sup>

These complications result directly from the tumultuous Khmer Rouge years and their long-lasting effects on ownership rights and housing markets. After private ownership of land was forbidden under the socialist regimes of the 1970s and 1980s, the 1992 Land Law reestablished private ownership of property, setting out the general principles of land tenure and registration of ownership.<sup>78</sup> Although officially required by the 1992 law, permitting and regulation for new construction and demolition were not consistently applied, nor was the registration process carried out thoroughly. As of 1995, less than 400,000 land registrations had actually been issued, while 4.4 million permits had been applied for.<sup>79</sup> This backlog of unregistered households were, therefore, technically regarded as informal occupants.

A much-needed overhaul of the insufficient 1992 legislation finally came into effect on July 20, 2001, when the Cambodia National Assembly passed the current Land Law. This legislation aimed to revamp the way land was managed and distributed, and most importantly

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<sup>77</sup> “Phonphakdee, Somsak and Sok Visal. “The Urban Poor Development Fund in Cambodia: Supporting Local and Citywide Development.” *Environment & Urbanization*, 21.2 (2009): 569.

<sup>78</sup> Stough, Patrick. “Historic Preservation in Southeast Asia: the Role of Public-Private Partnerships.” *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*, May, 2006.

<<http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-154817185/historic-preservation-southeast-asia.html>>

<sup>79</sup> Chapman, William. “The Best Laid Schemes: Land-Use Planning and Historic Preservation in Cambodia.” *The Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal*, 7.3 (1998). 541.



to protect the property rights of Cambodia citizens.<sup>80</sup> The law granted “recognition of rights to land of persons who have had peaceful, uncontested possession of the land for a certain period before the date of proclamation of the law.”<sup>81</sup> Despite the new and improved legislation, to this day it is still often impossible to distinguish the rightful owner of a property; the hundreds of thousands of title applications filed by Phnom Penh inhabitants since 1992 overwhelmed the land registration offices to the point that many are still being processed today. The registration process can also be lengthy and a financial burden to lower income residents. As a result, many lack the documentation to prove their ownership, relying on an understanding of customary ownership instead. This has not only led to numerous disputes, but had also greatly complicated the enforcement of land laws and regulations. The effects range from isolated incidents of land-grabs and mass evictions to more broad-reaching issues related to the function of housing and land markets.<sup>82</sup> For NGO’s and other interest groups aiming to empower the urban poor population, ownership and tenure rights have been one of the greatest challenges and barriers to poverty alleviation.

Despite the much-needed guidance, the Municipality of Phnom Penh did not create a comprehensive plan for these escalating needs until 2005, when it adopted the City Development Strategy for 2005-2015, and the first comprehensive plan for the city’s future development was devised. The resulting *Master Plan of Phnom Penh by 2020* is the first master plan since 1950, which had overseen urban development during the post-Independence period up until the war. The ambitious plan of 2020 aims to create new urban centers to prevent urban

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<sup>80</sup> Asian Development Bank, “ADB Congratulates Cambodia on Passage of Land Law.” 2001. Web. 2 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.adb.org/Documents/News/CARM/2001/carm200101.asp>>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Green, Nathan. “The Hard and the Soft of Title.” *Phnom Penh Post*. 24 Dec. 2008. Web. 2 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/Prime-Location/The-hard-and-the-soft-of-title.html>>

sprawl and to promote the development of suburban areas that are able to absorb the rapid urban growth.<sup>83</sup>

The Master Plan for 2020 also explicitly mentions the safeguarding of urban heritage as one of its priorities, claiming that conservation of key heritage buildings will strengthen tourism to the capital city.<sup>84</sup> Despite the Municipality's enthusiasm for historic preservation, the lack of enforcement and transparency of existing national heritage legislation makes the application of these aspirations unlikely. In this case, exporting the popular historic district model is neither a viable nor relevant solution for the conservation of Phnom Penh's shophouses. Taking into account the level of modification that has been applied to the city's historic shophouses, pure preservation of historic fabric is not the goal; it is the typology, rather, that is worth saving.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Considering the relevant legislative and regulatory framework – as well as accepting the notion that a conventional, rigid approach to neighborhood conservation is an ill-suited solution to safeguard the shophouses of Phnom Penh – recommendations to promote their preservation and continuity must be varied both in their nature and in their targeted actors. Overall, the following recommendations speak to two main development agendas: first to the top-down planners and policy-makers in central government and within the Municipality, and secondly to the numerous decentralized institutions and NGO's working in community-based development from the ground up.

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<sup>83</sup> Embassy of Cambodia to Australia and New Zealand Website. "Formulation of Master Plan for Developing Capital City of Phnom Penh." September, 2005. Web. 29 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.embassyofcambodia.org.nz/september/September8.htm>>

<sup>84</sup> The Municipality of Phnom Penh. "The Master Plan of Phnom Penh by 2020." 2005. Web. 11 Oct. 2009. <[http://www.phnompenh.gov.kh/english/Master\\_Plans/Master\\_Plan\\_By2020.htm](http://www.phnompenh.gov.kh/english/Master_Plans/Master_Plan_By2020.htm)>

Unless the heritage and associated values of the shophouse typology are first recognized, it is unlikely that a plan for their wide scale conservation and preservation would ever come into play. The citywide lack of awareness regarding their historical value is perhaps the greatest barrier in ensuring their long-term sustainability. To foster a sense of history and an understanding of the diverse benefits of shophouses, the first crucial step in promoting the conservation and construction of shophouses is to educate the residents of Phnom Penh across the board; this includes major decision makers and government officials, architects, and everyday city inhabitants alike.

To achieve this, a variety of strategies can be employed to reach such a broad audience. First, the Municipality of Phnom Penh must be introduced to the economic benefits of heritage conservation in general, above and beyond the immediate rewards that often result from an increase in heritage tourism. Additionally, urban vernacular architectural history must be brought to attention, as Phnom Penh's other layers of architectural heritage have consistently been emphasized on behalf of preservation advocates, overshadowing the humble history of the shophouse. UNESCO's upcoming seminar on Urban Heritage – which is set to take place in Phnom Penh some time in 2010 – is the ideal opportunity to promote shophouse preservation, both in its existing fabric and as an urban design concept. The resulting publication from the seminar – including an essay specifically devoted to the shophouses of Phnom Penh – could then be used as an educational tool in circulating awareness amongst students in architecture and city planning.

#### **SUPPLY-SIDE RECOMMENDATIONS: TOP-DOWN APPROACH**

While it goes without saying, the streamlining of an efficient land titling and registration system is an important hurdle to cross for any variation of an urban upgrading scheme. At

present, the costly nature of this process is one of the primary culprits for the lack of occupants' investment in home improvement, as the wide scale absence of formal ownership rights inhibits residents from qualifying for loans. Equally as pressing is the need to establish an urban tax base by enforcing a citywide real estate tax, which at present does not exist, but is rumored to be in the making. These two monumental achievements would have profound impacts on the capacity of both the Municipality and shophouse residents alike to invest in the aging stock of shophouses throughout the city.

Wide-scale shophouse conservation is just as much about urban sustainability as it is about healthy, functioning housing markets in which the natural forces of supply and demand combine to provide housing to all income brackets within the city. The conservation of the shophouse – hand-in-hand with the retention of housing affordable for low to middle-income city residents – begins with healthy housing markets that foster reinvestment and reuse of sound existing buildings, as well as the construction of dense, affordable, and mixed-use units for the growing urban population. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the supply-side challenges facing the housing problem in Phnom Penh are largely summarized by the notion that the existing affordable stock is in a state of dilapidation and overcrowding, with the majority of residents cut off from credit with which to finance upgrading and home improvement projects. On the demand side, the market for new construction is failing to supply units which are affordable for low to middle income residents, instead catering to the highest income brackets, who can afford to carry the costly burden of new construction. Given the severity of these problems, government intervention is both a warranted and necessary task. In order to allow markets to function freely, this intervention would best be initially executed in the form of subsidies as incentives to change favor of relevant actors in the housing arena until an adequate supply of housing became available.

To encourage investment on the existing supply-side issues, middle-income residents first and foremost need access to credit, which at present remains at large a luxury limited to the wealthy elite. For banks, the high risk associated with lending to financially insecure customers who often lack title is what has allowed for such an incomplete credit market. To address this monumental problem, the central government should provide national subsidies for banks to expand their lending down-market, so as to fill in the gap of credit access towards the middle to moderate-income urban population. With improved land and property titling systems, existing shophouse residents who own their property would have formal collateral with which to secure their loans, also making lending less risky from banks' perspective. This would enable banking institutions to reach more people, who would in turn be able to invest in much needed building maintenance and improvements.

To reinforce this expansion in lending, it is also recommended that the Municipality subsidize borrower education programs for first-time borrowers. Seeing as the vast majority of Phnom Penh residents have little to no experience securing and paying back a loan, informing new borrowers about the process is a crucial aspect in expanding the lending pool down-market.

Another component of supply-side recommendation is to expand land use zoning for existing shophouse neighborhoods, most notably the district of Duan Penh, which encompasses the city center (formally zoned as the Chinese quarter under the French Protectorate). While a recent land use map of central Phnom Penh created by the Municipality highlights the need to limit building height in the historic core of the city, the extent to which these regulations are actually imposed on developers building in the neighborhood is unknown. To ensure that existing shophouse neighborhoods can evolve and grow while retaining their essential character and mixed-use nature, zoning regulations should require that all ground floor units of

shophouses be zoned for commercial use, with the upper floors having more flexibility but primarily zoned residential. In addition, imposing regulations that would enforce long and narrow lot dimensions and height restrictions for new infill construction would foster the continuation of dense urban neighborhoods, while simultaneously controlling this density so that it would not become unmanageable.

Within this historic core of the city, measures should be taken to protect and preserve the most historic and architecturally valuable shophouses as important heritage resources for the city, with an emphasis on continuous rows of historic buildings. This requires more explicit legislation in support of the safeguarding of urban heritage, the composition of a prioritized list containing shophouses worthy of protection, and making other urban policies heritage-friendly. Heritage Mission, a French agency working within the Ministry of Culture, is the ideal actor to identify and conserve these heritage buildings with support from both the Municipality and the national government. Working in the realm of urban heritage conservation since 2005, the agency has already documented a vast number of heritage buildings in the city, including many of the oldest remaining shophouses. An inventory of historic buildings within the Duan Penh district has already been executed and is “shovel-ready” for conservation interventions.

#### **SUPPLY SIDE RECOMMENDATIONS: BOTTOM-UP APPROACH**

While the national government has the power to influence the lending pool of big banks by creating incentives for these institutions to move down-market to reach the middle income bracket, lower to moderate income groups remain excluded from this expanded credit market. While a handful of micro-finance banks are already making small loans to this group, they are doing so at such high interest rates that credit is essentially unaffordable for these undercapitalized residents. Once again, the national government should employ subsidies to

strengthen the capacity of micro-finance institutions to expand lending up market, so that moderate-income residents can have access to small loans geared towards home improvement. This includes lowering high interest rates and lengthening the terms of loans to stimulate borrowing, which will reach not only existing residents of shophouses, but also small business owners. Instead of tying these subsidies to the shophouses themselves – which could ultimately have severe effects on labor mobility – empowering residents through subsidies that make credit and investment possible will help to stimulate revitalization in shophouse neighborhoods without displacing residents. This very notion of investment – both for small business owners and residents alike – ensures that they will have a stake in the future of their community.

For the poorest of the poor, a variety of support organizations and NGOs are already making significant progress upgrading slums and squatter communities, most notably the Urban Poor Development Fund (UPDF). This model of slum upgrading – which lends to active community groups so they can invest in improving shared space and infrastructure – provides an ideal framework for upgrading the city’s most dilapidated shophouses. By strengthening and expanding community-based lending institutions to expand their capacity to reach not just slum and squatter communities, but also moderate to low income formal housing, the benefits of upgrading can reach a broader audience and have a larger impact on the city as a whole. The Municipality of Phnom Penh, which lacks the human capacity to carry out these upgrading schemes themselves, could fund these programs which would be implemented by NGO’s themselves. This would in effect stabilize the much-needed work being carried out by international organizations, which at present rely on outside funding which can potentially become unsustainable.

To reinforce these shophouse-centric, community-driven upgrading schemes, affiliated organizations should incorporate shophouse resident and homeowner education into lending

schemes, with a curriculum including mortgage financing, building maintenance and stewardship, and housing rights. This education should also include a general awareness of shophouse history and urban history of Phnom Penh.

#### **DEMAND-SIDE RECOMMENDATIONS: TOP-DOWN APPROACH**

While the conservation of existing shophouses must be a priority, new construction and the addition of thousands of new housing units is essential in order to meet the needs of the fast-growing urban population in Phnom Penh. In order to guide new development along a path that is affordable for the majority of this growing population, that creates viable, live / work neighborhoods, and that retains Phnom Penh's sense of place and urban identity, the Municipality should provide incentives for developers to build according to the shophouse model. More specifically, this entails lowering the opportunity cost for developers to make shophouse construction more affordable and profitable, so that it is a better alternative to the upscale housing for the rich that currently dominates the real estate market. Development should be guided in a way that creates a scale of affordability, depending on unit size and location. For lower-end shophouse apartments that may require a further distance from the city center, development should be focused along major roads as to keep residents connected to transit lines and therefore employment opportunities and labor markets. By providing production grants to encourage the construction of low-income rentals, the Municipality can increase the supply of affordable living environments.

#### **DEMAND SIDE RECOMMENDATIONS: BOTTOM-UP APPROACH**

The relocation and displacement of Phnom Penh's poorest residents is an unfortunate but inevitable reality as new development gains traction in the city center. Already, mass



evictions have uprooted entire communities, many of which have been compensated with subsidized housing in new settlements located far from the central city. According the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, 7,800 families have been evicted to fourteen resettlement sites since 1998.<sup>85</sup> Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT), a local NGO with a focus on housing rights, revealed in a 2009 survey that more than two thirds of urban poor settlements are now located in the four outer *Khans* (districts), whereas in 1997 more than two thirds were located in the inner *Khans*.<sup>86</sup> This highlights that the past ten years have seen a major shift in urban poor settlements out from the central city to outskirts of Phnom Penh. At resettlement sites, residents face a plethora of new challenges including a lack of access to basic infrastructure, healthcare, education, and most importantly jobs and labor markets. The costly trip back into the city center is often too high a burden for families to meet, in effect cutting them off from the job opportunities where residents formally were able to find work.

While these resettlement sites are certainly a last resort for the disempowered poor, it is nevertheless important to mitigate their shortcomings through thoughtful planning and urban design. NGO's and poor community organizations should encourage shophouse construction for new relocation settlements as a means to foster localized micro-scale business and efficiently introduce infrastructure. While households may not have the cash at hand to build a multi-story shophouse upon arrival, the incremental housing strategy is extremely compatible with shophouse design. Once the household has enough resources or access to credit with which to finance further building, additional floors could be added as living space, thus allowing for the conversion of the ground floor living space into a shop for commercial use. In this light, smart

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<sup>85</sup> Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. "Using the CDS to Explore Ways of Bringing Poor Communities Into the City's Planning Process." Web. 29 Mar. 2010. < [http://www.achr.net/cds\\_pp.htm](http://www.achr.net/cds_pp.htm) >

<sup>86</sup> Sahmakum Teang Tnaut. "The 8 Khan Survey: Urban Poor Settlements in Phnom Penh." Dec. 2009. 1.

**FIGURE 25:** Leaders from a community savings group meet with the Urban Poor Development Fund for borrowers' education training. Building in education programs into any new lending scheme is a crucial component of expanding access to credit amongst low income groups in Phnom Penh. *Photo by the author.*



**FIGURE 26:** Shophouse design is extremely conducive to the incremental architecture building process. The widespread addition of floors to the existing, formal stock proves this compatibility. *Photo by the author.*

planning and forward-thinking urban design can help guide a community's development into a more self-sustaining neighborhood.

In situations where households arrive to a new, un-serviced site before infrastructure has been installed, the shophouse model of development is again a relevant design solution. The narrow lot formation and short street frontages of shophouses are extremely conducive to the installation of infrastructure and services before or after construction has taken place. Encouraging shophouse construction along a street grid – their natural urban arrangement – would allow for incremental, organic growth, where built-in space for micro-enterprise would give uprooted communities the potential to grow into healthy urban neighborhoods.

## **CONCLUSION**

Conserving Phnom Penh's character as a shophouse city is a monumental task that spans numerous themes, challenges, and income groups, and one that will require the cooperation of all who are working in relation to issues of housing and urban development in the city. The existing supply of shophouses – mainly concentrated in the Duan Penh district of the center city - is by and large an issue of housing for the middle class, who at present are largely excluded from the credit market. To encourage investment in these neighborhoods, residents first and foremost need access to finance with which to invest in building rehabilitation and upgrading. Expanding lending by major banks down-market is not feasible without the intervention of the national government, which could encourage banks to do so both by improving land titling and owner registration systems, and by providing subsidies to banks to take on the risk of lending to less wealthy borrowers.

The demand for new housing and construction in Phnom Penh has never been greater. As the rural to urban migration increases, planners should employ the shophouse as a tool for sustainable urban development given the adaptable, climate-friendly, and mixed-use nature of

shophouse buildings and neighborhoods. Through incentives for developers, zoning and land use regulations, and small-scale, ground-up incremental housing, the Municipality of Phnom Penh, NGO's, and pro-poor interest groups can collectively guide future development along a more equitable path that is both well-suited for the needs of the present while also in continuity with the city's past.

To approach Phnom Penh's urban heritage as solely an economic commodity is to miss out on a bundle of opportunities imbedded within the fabric of its shophouse neighborhoods. These benefits range from the overall affordability of compact housing units and commercial spaces, the labor-intensive , job-creating nature of upgrading, environmental conservation through reuse, cultural continuity through heritage conservation, and community strengthening by means of resident retention. The Municipality should not approach shophouse conservation through the narrow perspective of an historic district revitalization scheme aimed at attracting tourism. On the contrary, the shophouse needs to be applied as a smart urban planning tool aimed at creating new, affordable neighborhoods, and as a means to preserve existing neighborhoods that are already functioning well.

## CONCLUSION

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### **RECOGNIZING THE UBIQUITOUS**

The central aim of this thesis is to shed light on one of Phnom Penh's greatest and yet most overlooked assets: its inherited stock of dense, mixed-use, affordable and culturally significant shophouses. In doing so, this research comprises the first comprehensive overview of the Southeast Asian regional vernacular building type as specific to its evolution and development on Cambodian soil.

Recognizing how the shophouse shapes Phnom Penh today is the first step in understanding its multifaceted values, and crucial to this understanding is the century-long history of continuous construction and consequent evolution of the building type. By revealing the cultural history of the shophouse – its nature as a hybrid building form transplanted in Cambodia by Chinese immigrants – we can better understand its greater role and function in historical perspective. It is no coincidence that the shophouse arrived in Phnom Penh during one of the most significant points of transition in Cambodia's history – the arrival of the French in the 1860's. A typically rural society, traditional Cambodian buildings favored light wood

construction and detached single-family houses. The need for the shophouse – both from the perspective of French colonists and Chinese merchants alike – was the need for a dense, mixed-use marketplace and a durable, fireproof building stock. The shophouse was specifically well suited to meet these needs, serving as one of the main mechanisms by which Phnom Penh transformed into a modern urban center.

Tracking the evolution of the shophouse typology through the following decades explains the variety we see in the existing stock, with the most diverse collection found in the historic core of the city, known today as the Duan Penh district. These changes in both style and scale correlate directly with changes in building materials, technology, the economic climate, and available labor skills. As shophouses adopted these new appearances, the essential elements that define the typology remained the same: small residential units in the upper floors allowed for density and affordability, while their commercial counterparts on the ground level created commercially viable and culturally rich neighborhoods.

Phnom Penh's urban history can be largely characterized by cycles of growth, decline, and regeneration of the building stock. We can see this in various chapters of Phnom Penh's past – starting with the initial construction of shophouses at the start of the French Protectorate's control of Cambodia in the 1860's, where sturdy, masonry constructions replaced their fire-prone wooden counterparts. Again in the 1890's the city saw another construction boom, whereby the last of these timber structures would be replaced with modern buildings, infrastructure, and services. By the 1930's, the aging stock of first generation shophouses – coupled with an increase in demand from the incoming population - triggered another burst of growth and the expansion of the spatial footprint of Phnom Penh. With very little building again until independence, the city's shophouses fell into a state of overcrowding and disrepair, setting the stage for the great construction boom that followed Cambodia's newfound independence in

the 1950's and 1960's. At this moment in the city's development, one can most clearly see this phenomenon of urban decay, regeneration and reinterpretation. The shophouse was reinvented to accommodate the need to both densify and modernize the aged housing stock.

During Phnom Penh's steady ebb and flow of construction and regeneration, the shophouse – in all its various forms – prevailed as the tool of choice to expand and modernize the city on behalf of architects and planners alike. Today, it is mainly this last wave of shophouse construction from the Post-Independence period that has declined into a state of dilapidation and overcrowding, due to heavy use in the years before the war, abandonment during the Pol Pot regime, and the somewhat chaotic pattern of resettlement starting in the 1980's. As the urban population grows at an expected 4% per year<sup>87</sup>, the city of Phnom Penh finds itself in a situation much like those moments in its history just before the onset of a major building boom. The question, then, is just how will today's decision-makers choose to shape the physical environment of Cambodia's capital city?

In many respects, the developers who are at work constructing Phnom Penh's newest large-scale community developments around the city's periphery are already making these decisions. Camko City, Grand Phnom Penh International City, and Plaza Cambodia - three of the largest of these developments – will, however, not come close to meeting Phnom Penh's growing demand for middle to low income housing. Central to this lack of affordability is the design of these satellite developments, which omit traditional shophouse construction from their plans.<sup>88</sup> As the Municipality of Phnom Penh and NGO's grapple with the challenges associated with housing the urban poor and empowering moderate to middle income residents,

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<sup>87</sup> The Municipality of Phnom Penh. "Project of The Development Master Plan of Phnom Penh." Web. 24 Feb. 2010. <[http://www.phnompenh.gov.kh/english/Master\\_Plans/Project\\_DMPP.htm](http://www.phnompenh.gov.kh/english/Master_Plans/Project_DMPP.htm)>

<sup>88</sup> While both the Grand Phnom Penh International City and Plaza Cambodia incorporate shophouse construction into their planning schemes, these buildings do not incorporate all of the typology-defining elements as highlighted in Chapter 4, therefore lacking the same benefits of affordability.

the shophouse shows tremendous promise as a tool to meet these needs. One only needs to look at the course of the city's development and evolution for confirmation.

Employing the shophouse as a tool for equitable urban growth is a potentially powerful strategy that can be divided into two major functions: first by upgrading the existing stock, and secondly by promoting the typology for new affordable construction. As highlighted within the previous chapter, both agendas necessitate first and foremost increasing awareness surrounding the benefits of shophouse neighborhoods amongst planners, policy makers, architects, and city residents alike. Only after the heritage value and performance values are understood can further measures be taken to encourage their conservation and redevelopment. These measures, by and large, consist of increasing access to credit across the board to encourage and enable investment in existing buildings on behalf of residents, and in new affordable construction on behalf of developers. While easily stated, this task of increasing access to credit is monumental. It is contingent upon the wholehearted support and dedication of the National Government to include the poor and middle class in its development agenda, to streamline titling and registration systems, and to be willing to provide subsidies and incentives to guide the direction of the housing and construction markets to work in their favor.

Taking this major barrier into consideration, what is the feasibility that a pro-shophouse planning agenda could realistically be put forward? What are the more rigid obstacles, and which of the necessary tasks are in turn more approachable? Which steps are contingent upon other variables, and which should be put forth immediately to serve as a catalyst for further progress? By highlighting the main limitations and greatest planning challenges, effort can in turn be focused on those areas which show potential for change in short term.

Lack of general awareness concerning Phnom Penh's urban history and evolution is perhaps what has pushed planners to promote a brand of growth that completely departs from



its patterns of development over the course of the past 150 years. Concentrating on education to foster a sense of history and awareness amongst those planners, politicians, and NGO's working in housing and development issues is the most logical and feasible task to take on initially. The shophouse can be promoted as a tool for urban sustainability through articles, seminar presentations, and conferences on housing and urban heritage. Capacity building for the Municipality of Phnom Penh would aid in improving the efficiency of land titling and registration systems, and push forward the schedule for establishing a real estate tax once and for all. This would in turn provide steady income for the city as well as improve residents' eligibility for loans.

Understaffed and under-funded, the Municipality simply does not have the capacity to coordinate a large-scale upgrading or lending scheme on its own. Bridging partnerships with existing NGO's already working with the urban poor is the most viable approach to create a support system for existing shophouse residents. The micro-lending model used by the Urban Poor Development Fund for upgrading low-income communities shows great potential for expansion and revamping to address the upgrading need on a neighborhood scale.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Given the broad scope of this research question, there are ample opportunities for further research, both surrounding the detailed history of the shophouse in Phnom Penh as well as regarding its potential to mitigate the city's growth challenges in years to come. In regards to the former, a closer look into archival documentation could provide a variety of insight surrounding such issues as the shophouse's early history and arrival on Cambodian soil, or more detailed accounts of Norodom's earliest building codes. Speaking to the city's growth challenges, a detailed assessment of the condition of Phnom Penh's existing stock of

shophouses would highlight those areas and typical conditions most in need of upgrading, and those that are already in sufficient condition. A study on existing shophouse construction and renovation could reveal the technical aspects of executing this work, as well as the costs of labor and materials.

Designing adequate solutions to address Phnom Penh's escalating planning challenges needs to be rooted in a deep understanding of the city's existing fabric. The Municipality of Phnom Penh and international organizations working in urban development alike would be wise to recognize and safeguard those aspects of the physical city that are already working in their favor. The shophouse – through its economic, social, and environmental impacts over time - has proven itself a highly malleable tool for meeting the changing needs of the city. For Phnom Penh to take on a more equitable direction in its development while retaining its unique sense of place, these values need to be recognized, safeguarded, and applied creatively to the ever-changing urban landscape.

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## APPENDIX

### PHNOM PENH IN CONTEXT



**CAMBODIA.** Source: <http://www.canbypublications.com/maps/cambodia-map-large.htm>

2008



**Phnom Penh in 2008.** Source: [http://www.cambodia-realestate.com/real\\_estate\\_phnom\\_penh/phnom\\_penh\\_map\\_large.htm](http://www.cambodia-realestate.com/real_estate_phnom_penh/phnom_penh_map_large.htm)



EVOLUTIONARY MAPPING OF PHNOM PENH: 1867- 1971

1867



Phnom Penh in 1867. Source: Phnom Penh Then and Now. 32.

1925



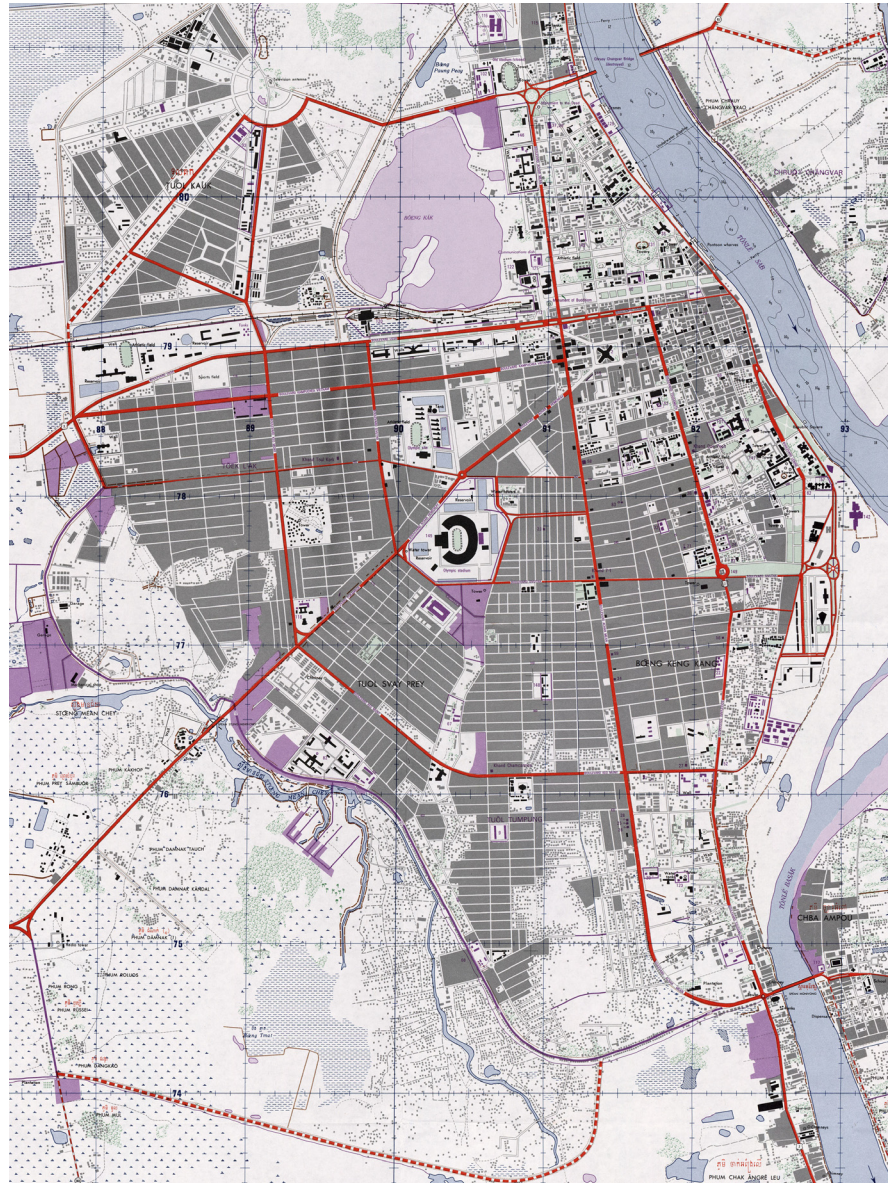
Phnom Penh in 1925. Source: *Phnom Penh Then and Now*. 85.

1966



Phnom Penh in 1966. Source: Michel Verrot, Heritage Mission.

1971



**Phnom Penh in 1971.** Source: U.S. Defense Mapping Agency, <http://www.mapcruzin.com/free-cambodia-maps.htm>

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