



Negotiating the urban space: Unlocking the development of the historic center in the modern city

Carlo Santoro *¹ 

¹American University of Phnom Penh, Department of Architecture, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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Abstract

The paper introduces a brief analysis of the historical processes that have contributed to the paralysis and degradation of downtown Phnom Penh (capital of Cambodia). It shows the impossibility of implementing stringent regulation in favor of negotiating practices among various urban actors based on relationships established by social and economic subordination and culturally embedded in the population. It seems that these unavoidable mechanisms should be explored to devise strategies aimed instead at the redevelopment of green space and the consequent valorization of historic real estate, creating a stimulus for the emergence of public-private cooperation capable of supporting the necessary investments. The paper discusses the actual situation in the city of Phnom Penh and tries to indicate possible solution in order to make a compromise between the conservation of the historical centers, or what is left of it, and a socially useful rehabilitation of the districts. A more pragmatic and sustainable operation will mitigate the risk of fragmentation or worse the disappearance of the historic fabric, focusing on the once-recognized identity of the city, considered a "green garden" and the "pearl of Asia." To support the analysis carried out in the paper some reference from other similar experiences in other city in the world are presented.

1. Introduction

This paper draws on literature that focuses on the period of the last 25 years. It compares existing research on urban development in Phnom Penh city and suggests possible interpretations of the underlying socio-economic mechanisms. The paper traces the introduction of urban planning tools imported with the help of international agencies and adopted by local governments, considering their subsequent failed implementations. Proceeds to analyze current legislation on urban land management, taking into account its interpretations through current planning practice in the Country. It proposes possible scenarios by investigating emerging phenomena in light of urban redevelopment theories the identify the essential role of public space. It proceeds in the analysis of the territory through survey campaigns, (conducted within the Urban Design Studio of the American University of Phnom Penh) and aimed at producing maps and photos of the current state,

suggesting intervention areas aimed at heritage revitalization.

2. Historical overview

At the beginning of the 19th century, Phnom Penh belongs to a group of merchant cities and can be considered no more than a transit port located at the intersection of the Mekong River with the Tonle Sap and Bassac Rivers, in an area known as the "Four Arms" (Stetten, 1997).

The most important transformations occur after 1884, when the management of the territory comes under the total control of the French protectorate. Thus, in the early 20th century, the redevelopment of the original settlement begins with the addition of new administrative buildings in the area surrounding the Post Office, the extension of the Chinese commercial district towards the Central Market, and the organization of a green boulevard between the Royal Railway Station and the Riverside (Igout, 1993).

* Corresponding Author

^{*}(c.santoro@aupp.edu.kh) ORCID ID 0000-0002-7560-9297

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Figure 1. Urban Design Studio Research: Current Development of Phnom Penh City, American University of Phnom Penh



Figure 2. Central Districts, Phnom Penh



Figure 3. Former French Protectorate District, Phnom Penh



Figure 4. Wat Phnom historical site - View from the Development Council of Cambodia (former Palais du Commissariat de France), Phnom Penh.

As Cambodia gains independence in 1953, the city undergoes large-scale urban interventions along the south and west directions expanding from the central zone (Molyvann, 2006).

Sadly, the sad history of the 1970s is marked by the outbreak of the devastating civil war, which begins with General Lon Nol's coup and follows with the Khmer Rouges regime until 1979 (Chandler, 1991).

After liberation in the 1980s, a land management model is imposed, borrowing principles from the Vietnamese legal framework. Land in the city center is mostly granted to government and military officials or for collective use. (Carrier, 2019)

Even with new elections in the 1990s, no real political stability is achieved (Strangio, 2014).

Under these conditions, the 1992 Land Law seeks to put heritage, cultural and historical properties, monasteries, and ancient public buildings under protection, granting government authorities the discretion to expel occupants for public interests. Many areas and properties classified for collective use are cleared in exchange for compensation. (Törhönen, 2001).

The current district configuration of the central area divided into 5 areas takes shape. Daun Penh district emerges as the administrative center of the Capital. At the same time, real towns within the city take shape under the control of ministerial offices and with quasi-independent management. (Carrier, 2019).

3. Urban inertia of the city center

The effect of this process is becoming increasingly evident today. The financial resources allocated are so limited that they cannot even cover "basic urban services." (World Bank Group, 2016). The development of the historic city, therefore, must necessarily respond to planning logic that foster private investments, and often involve capitals from abroad. As is the case with suburban areas of the city (Percival & Waley 2012), the main objective becomes the maximization of corporate profits achieved by increasing the density of the built-up area while leaving the urban structure and infrastructure unchanged (Blancot, 1997). In the specific, the urban fabric still largely consists of blocks of residential

buildings 3 to 6 stories high, with commercial activities located on the ground floor and facing the streets. The model keeps borrowing from the concept of the French urban block and combines it with that of the Chinese merchant's house (Hetreau-Pottier, 1997), but at the same time is increasingly dotted with the inclusion of tower buildings.

This recent phenomenon of high-rise development is indeed fragmented and concentrated in a few areas, but it represents basically the only significant breakthrough in a 60-year real estate stagnation.

In general, local people instead tend to occupy low-rise buildings by adapting them to mixed functions according to their needs, especially with temporary and informal activities.

The trend toward informality is also driven by the difficulty of ensuring an adequate degree of security of tenure (Thiel, 2010), given the low penetration of cadastral registration (Anttonen, 2012).

Obviously, this extends to public spaces, invaded especially near arteries of intense vehicular traffic and walkways. (Decant et al., 2009).

Finally, in the historic city, development "continues to take place in an ad hoc manner," (World Bank Group 2016) and proceeds slowly through urban projects that find wide acceptance (Blancot, 2006).

The only interventions to infrastructure and utilities are planned with external technical assistance and financed with loans and international cooperation funds. (World Bank Group, 2016).

The lack of regular maintenance is especially deteriorating heritage buildings (Blancot, 2003), which will then inevitably have to be demolished and replaced, contributing even more to the processes described above.

The second revision of the Land Law in 2001, enacted now 20 years ago, attempts unsuccessfully to protect sidewalks, gardens, parks, and public services, such as schools, hospitals, administrative offices; in general, archaeological, cultural, and historical heritage, as well as all properties being used by the royal family.

In practice, this instrument proves to be inadequate, the population receives it with difficulty, and the informal dynamics of land management, as mentioned,

remain prevalent. This shows the evident limitation of standardized reforms, (Carrier, 2019) which fail to eradicate the parallel system of exchange of inherited land and real estate by right of use in favor of the Roman territorial property right attested by cadastral registration (Fauveaud, 2015).

Moreover, a significant advantage is held by those who can maneuver the imported regulatory apparatus through the help of international experts (Pierdet, 2011).

The result then is the gradual depopulation of Phnom Penh's central districts. In the past 10 years, a quarter of the population has left the area heading to the periphery and supplementing migration flows from the rest of the country. Nowadays the population growth rate is 5 percent annually, and the city already concentrates 15 percent of the national population on its territory, reaching a density ten times higher than any other city in Cambodia (National Institute of Statistic, 2020).



Figure 5. Central Market and Shop Houses Neighborhood, Phnom Penh.

4. Failure of current master planning approach

It may be unfruitful to persist only with one-sided discussions centered on the absence of regulatory frameworks aimed at urban space management, e.g., the lack of detailed land use or phasing plans (World Bank Group, 2016). Through the analysis briefly introduced here, we understand, indeed, how management is highly subject to negotiation practices fueled by economic, social and historical mechanisms of spatial production, especially during the implementation phase (Fauveaud, 2014).

As a matter of fact, the transformations of the urban fabric have not been coordinated by the implementation of a long-term strategic plan, despite the copious production of guidelines at various administrative levels. They are the result of habits, very often transmitted verbally and mainly referring to established customary practices. Administrative regulatory instruments are adopted as very broad guidelines, are often left in draft status, reaching approval status when by then they are clearly not effective and need to be redrafted. For example, Phnom Penh's current Land Use Master Plan was only approved in late 2015, following Sub-Decree No. 181, but it contains only a time projection up to the year 2020. It turns out to be a very general policy document on considerations following the directions of

the "White Book" prepared by the French Bureau of Urbanism in 2009 (World Bank Group, 2016). Urban planning and land management instruments promoted by international consultants and agencies have so far taken a slow drafting process and have failed to address the complex conditions of the city.

There is certainly a need to continue to rethink the long-term vision of the current Master Plan, consider the integration and formulation of new regulations and codes, promote viable urban planning processes, and strengthen their technical capacity for implementation (World Bank Group, 2016).

The risk, however, is to replicate the same mistake made by the administration of the French Protectorate if we fail to think that pre-existing practices (Carrier, 2019) are the result of a social and territorial process rooted over the course of time. It may be misleading to consider their simplistic exemplification in the terms of a system that is corrupt or bent only to the desire to increase its economic capital (Fauveaud, 2015).

After all, the fallacy of the master planning process has been largely proven especially if one frames it in its modern meaning introduced by the rationalist current (e.g., that of CIAM) and now embraced in its new globalizing form in the former colonies of Southeast Asia and beyond (Un-Habitat, 2009).

Could we instead proceed through a system of desirable scenarios, not necessarily prescriptive, that would allow the urban development model to be constantly adjusted to the dynamics of the relationships among various urban actors and the inevitable rapid change in their socio-economic conditions?

We are most likely not far from the era of a " Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Urban Development" (United Nation Cambodia, 2019), when we will be able to test, optimize and validate proposed interventions in real time, thanks to the perspectives introduced by a new digital twinning software (Mccluskey et al., 2012).



Figure 6. Old Chinese Shop Houses Front, Phnom Penh.



Figure 7. Royal Place Front Gardens, Phnom Penh.



Figure 8. Dilapidated Colonial Building- Former Gendarmerie, Phnom Penh.



Figure 9. High-rise buildings emerging in the Central BKK1 Neighborhood, Phnom Penh.

5. Toward a green infrastructure for the preservation of the historic center

The management logic of the central district could then follow up on what has already been suggested by theories such as Landscape Urbanism (Waldheim, 2016) in areas without population growth. There should be a focus on the redevelopment and valorization of the existing urban fabric through the reconsideration of empty space as a potential green infrastructure to support the rehabilitation of historic properties, improving the living conditions of resident inhabitants and mitigating the heavy anthropogenic impact on the environment. The unbuilt could thus take on a fundamental importance in guiding evolutionary

directives of the city and land governance, facilitating the coexistence of the green network with that of fundamental services such as drainage works, flood control systems, sewers, and pipelines. The identification of such areas could foster, among other things, the emergence of a true urban ecosystem (Downton, 2009) by encouraging biodiversity. As highlighted in the Phnom Penh Green City Strategic Plan prepared by the Global Green Growth Institute, the bountiful gardens of some schools, vacant land, abandoned buildings, pagodas, and even private stores and hotels willing to engage more with the public could be converted into an interconnected collective space used as an urban park, compensating for the exploitation of the increasingly densified urban fabric (GGGI, 2019).



Figure 10. The Independent Monument Park continued by the Royal Palace Park and the tree-lined avenue of Norodom, Phnom Penh.

In this regard, the study conducted by Urban Design Studio at the American University of Phnom Penh intends to identify areas dedicated to possible interventions insisting on a potential green network within the city's historic center (Fig. 14 and Fig. 13).

It would be geared not only to the establishment of "third places" (often reduced by theory into bars and small restaurants) (Oldenburg, 1989), but also to places

of community services and aggregating spaces for sports, youth activities or children's games.

Spaces could be arranged for community events such as large public events, concerts, art exhibitions, and even the inclusion of community gardens and urban orchards, following French and German examples, in cities such as Lyon and Berlin (Clergeau, 2020).

In the specific, we might mention the "urban pockets" among the residential blocks in Lyon's Confluence district or the Princess Gardens in Berlin, but also the green community courtyards in Tübingen or the primary school of science and biodiversity in Boulogne, the International Campus Ecocity in Wünsdorf and the Center for culture and Scienze, Cité Nature, in Arras.

We might think, therefore, of extending these opportunities by assuming a concept of semi-public spaces in which the management of the public area is entrusted to the private sector because it is functional in encouraging emerging entrepreneurship. as implemented, for example, in the Ile Seguin cultural hub in the Trapèze eco-quartier of Boulogne.

As anticipated since more than a decade by the proponents of Tactical Urbanism (Lydon & Garcia, 2015) and recalled by Ottone and Cocci Grifoni (2017), opportunities can be drawn from bottom-up micro-transformation actions on even small lots lacking any organizational form (Clement, 2004) or even abandoned (Viganò, 2018).

Forms of "urban acupuncture" capable of structuring a map of actions and reactions well known when looking at the examples implemented in the city of Curitiba in Brazil (Lerner, 2014), in Comuna 13 of Medellín or in Sant Antoni Superblock of Barcellona.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is necessary to create negotiating mechanisms capable of triggering public-private agreements that can overcome the lack of funds allocated for the management of the city and in particular the historic center.

With this perspective in mind, it is advisable to look at urban planning tools that are more adaptive than those typically associated with a rigid master planning process and to date still proposed by various consultants outside the local government.

Tools such as framework planning, already as proposed by Carta 2014 in his "Reimagining Urbanism",

but also the simpler project financing can be repurposed (Montani, 2013), reorganizing the historic center through the introduction of pilot projects or "urban fractals" (Downton, 2009), transforming it into a real laboratory of experimental urban redevelopment

Often in Southeast Asia, unfortunately, lack of interest is among the main causes of abandonment for those historic buildings that are simply classified by the administration as "dilapidated," with the obvious exception of monumental buildings. As pointed out earlier in the article, they are of little or no value to local urban actors, primarily because there is no perceived economic benefit from their renovation. Moreover, in the case of Phnom Penh's historic center, the preserved fabric belongs to a time when completely new characters were introduced. Given the distance with the pre-existing local tradition, it has remained associated with the cultural identity of the former colonizers instead of reflecting that of its current inhabitants. As we argued above, in the absence of maintenance, buildings are doomed to collapse and simply be replaced.

A change in perspective could be assumed by adopting a pragmatic approach. In general, city development occurs through necessarily profit-driven operations that follow dynamics based on local negotiation practices. Although organized parks and gardens seem to be scarce in the city, studies conducted on central districts note the existence of construction-free areas. These very spaces could be the catalysts for a full-scale socio-spatial regeneration effort, which could begin by pointing to areas of intervention capable of activating a pre-existing and still potentially present green network. Finally, the value of historic buildings in the vicinity of these areas would obviously gain a significant economic premium, and at the same time the entire urban fabric would regain a characteristic closer to the local cultural identity. This would stimulate in its inhabitants a fundamental sense of belonging and most likely motivate them to undertake the necessary maintenance, preservation and restoration work.



Figure 11. Former De Verneville water canal reclaimed in the '30. A formal linear park, currently under renovation, bordering the south side of the former French Protectorate District, the Wat Phnom historical site and the Embassy of the United States of America (former Sport Club), Phnom Penh.



Figure 12. Preah Sihanoniraja Buddhist University continued by the former Russian Federation Diplomatic Compound and the Sofitel Phnom Penh Phokeethra Garden, Phnom Penh.



Figure 13. Urban Design Studio Research: Potential green network in the central historic districts of Phnom Penh (North Zone), American University of Phnom Penh.



Figure 14. Urban Design Studio Research: Potential green network in the central historic districts of Phnom Penh (South Zone), American University of Phnom Penh.



Figure 15. School complex Lycée Sisowath, Chaktomuk Secondary School and Royal University of Fine Arts, further continued by the Royal Place and National Museum Gardens, Phnom Penh.



Figure 16. Renovated Art Deco Royal Train Station building and garden, Phnom Penh.



Figure 17. Kiosks in the gardens surrounding the National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.



Figure 18. Former Residence of Princess Sisowath Pindara reconverted in Bar and Restaurant at Hyatt Regency located in the proximity of the National Museum of Cambodia and Royal Palace, Phnom Penh.



Figure 19. Friend Future Factory, renovation of the nineteenth-century industrial pavilions and courtyard, Phnom Penh.



Figure 20. Temporary bar and garden organized on a vacant lot along road No. 21 (former historic residential villas neighborhood), Phnom Penh.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Statement of Research and Publication Ethics

Research and publication ethics were complied with in the study.

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