

# Continuity and change: Transformations in the urban history of Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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In simple terms, transformation is the process that occurs when something changes from one state to another. Irrespective of the definitional nuances in urban and rural research, there is consensus that such events are complex and ongoing. To disentangle the factors and drivers from the outcomes and features, this paper's conceptual approach differentiates between the transitional process, or the "flow", and the "status", which refers to the existing state of affairs at a specific time in the past. My historical analysis, however, in the guise of snapshots, presents several in-between stages in Phnom Penh's urban development status with particular reference to its urban morphology.

This angle prioritizes long-term historical and slowly evolving structures as *longue durée* over a big leap forward into Modernity. This priority also seeks to counter the identification of continuity rather than change – a widespread occupational hazard to which historians are prone. Empirical evidence mostly points to persistency and resilience; consequently, if changes do occur, they do not necessarily reflect progress but modifications at best. Implicitly, however, "transformation" is still associated with *progress* (development, growth, evolution, improvement or forward-movement), which is the paradigm of *modernization* as a model of an advancing transition from "pre-modern" or traditional to "modern societies" (Knöbl, 2003).

The path Phnom Penh – Cambodia's current capital – took to *modernity*, understood here as our contemporary (hyper)modern times, was neither a history of progress nor straight forward (Eisenstadt, 2003; Chandler, 2000). Events, whose scope was unprecedented, triggered profound changes, altering both the urban landscape (the physical side) and the urbanity (the urban life) of the Lower Mekong metropole. Not only the vicissitudes of Phnom Penh's relatively short 150-year history, but also Cambodia's general settlement history raises the question: What is rural and what is urban? This question is especially relevant for one of this collective volume's guidelines, namely providing a regional framework. "Western" scholarly concepts of "the city," particularly the sharp contrast between urban and rural areas, are often not appropriate for Southeast Asia. Historically, this academic binarity is used in terms of rural transitions, which

are repeatedly compared to the economic transformation from agricultural to industrial economies as witnessed in many parts of nineteenth century Europe and across Asia and Latin America in the twentieth century. In view of the ever-intensifying links between urban and rural areas in contemporary Southeast Asia, the question needs to be raised whether a centrifugal, outward-bound urbanization sprawl or a centripetal inward-bound “ruralization to semi-urban space” is at work – or even both trajectories simultaneously. To understand the region's complexities and long-term evolutions, one needs to take a step back to the heydays of the Khmer Empire.

## **Before Phnom Penh: Angkor and wandering residential towns**

Recent comparative archaeological research revealed that “Greater Angkor, at its peak, was [...] the world's most extensive preindustrial low-density urban complex” (Evans et al., 2007: 14280). Between the ninth and fifteenth centuries AD, a vast cumulative settlement landscape emerged north-east of the Tonle Sap, the great nutrition-rich inland lake in the Cambodian lowlands.

Two concomitant changes gave rise to a polynuclear settlement pattern covering approximately 1,000 square kilometers: the largescale rice agriculture and the implementation of a sacral kingdom as the realm's political frame. Canals crisscrossed this landscape dotted with water reservoirs, which also had intensifying and extending settlement areas. Greater Angkor was a *hydraulic city* designed to attract as many settlers as possible through its wide-ranging irrigation works that allowed stable agrarian production around residential complexes containing palaces and a temple mountain as the spiritual center. Angkor Thom (literally the “Great City”), with its central, late twelfth century temple district of Angkor Wat, was the last and most enduring walled capital in the history of the Khmer empire (Higham, 2001; Coe, 2003). Time and again, the great kings relocated their royal residence to renew their symbolic power and to expand their network of local temples, ponds, and durable agricultural space with symmetrical moat-and-mound complexes as the distinctive spatial structure. Despite all these man-made irrigation efforts, the local agriculture's backbone is still to this day low-density, rain-fed rice growing in small bunded fields (paddy-rice without irrigation), with dry rice (or upland rice) used as a supplement, as well as flood-retreat and floating rice farming (Delvert, 1961; Martin, 1981; Grubauer and Golzio, 2008). The design and construction of this kind of extensive (agri)cultural environment did not – and still does not – require centralized planning under the guidance of a masterplan that an elite-appointed authority implements. By adapting to the microgeographical conditions and involving the local traditions, Cambodia's rural-urban agro-landscape evolved bottom-up and at a local level rather than top-down. This persistent structure of small-scale farmers and labor-intensive production made modernization difficult. Today, high investment cost and the abundance of “industrious hands” are impeding mechanization while the traditional practice of planting gluten-rich paddy rice prevails. Most Cambodian farmers are smallholders with less than two hectares per household, of which 75% is devoted to rice. A slow transformation only takes place in fertilization and diversifying crops (high-

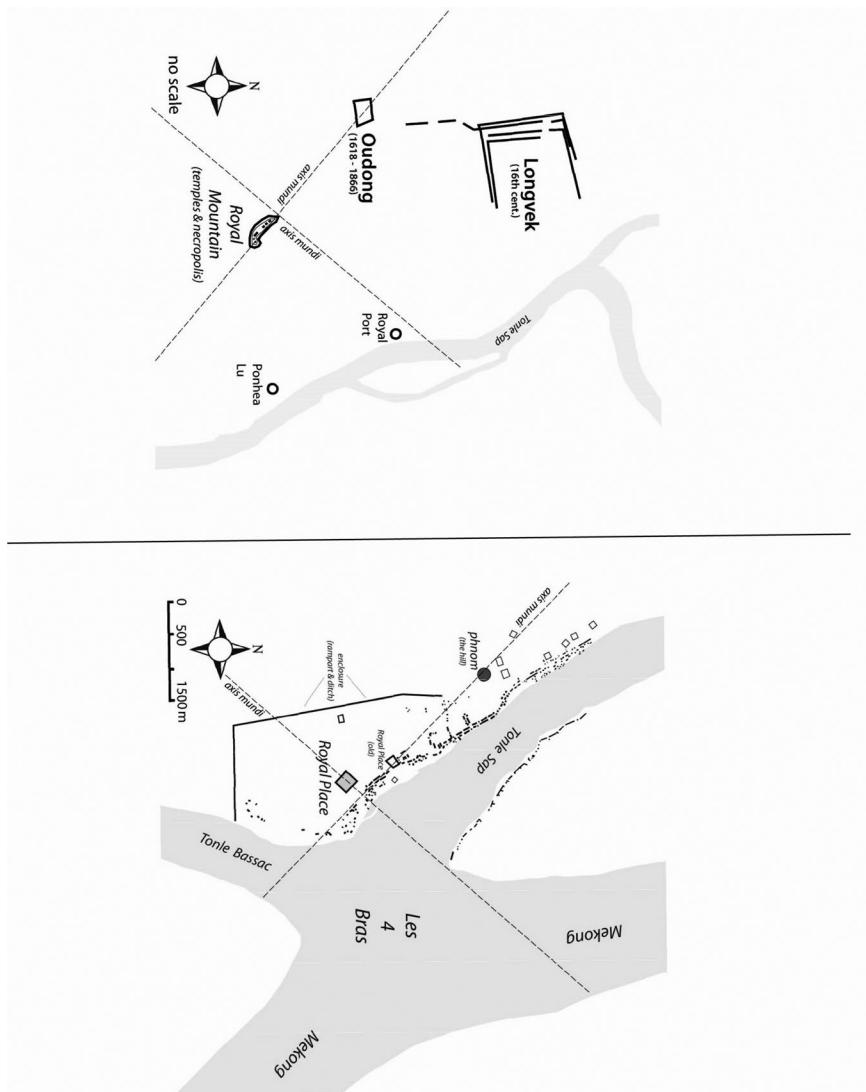
yield rice varieties or vegetables, see Eliste and Zorya, 2015). Technically speaking, little has changed in the rice farming communities since the days of Angkor.

Whatever caused the demise or collapse of the old Khmer empire (there is as yet no ultimate explanation), the reasons were definitely not monocausal. It is generally accepted that, in the sixteenth century, the Khmer kings left the Angkor region due to political and socio-economic reasons. Their motives included the cyclical rise and fall of competing regional overlords and grandee families, who vied with the central kingdom to control the labor and the ongoing conflicts with neighboring powers (i.e. Siam, Champa, and Dai Viet). Ecological impact and shifts in global trade are also frequently mentioned. New capitals were founded farther south-east: Basan/Bashan (in Chinese sources) was the capital between 1431/34 and 1525/30, followed by Longvek (1525/30-1593), Srei Santhor (1594-1620), Udong, twice (1620-58 and 1794-1863/65), and other short-lived ones like Bâ Phnom (*Caturmukh* – literally the “four faces” in Khmer), including a brief return to Angkor. Phnom Penh (from 1865) was the last in this series of capitals (Khin, 1991; Golzio, 2007, 2011; Wolters, 1966).

When the Khmer court moved to the south-western part of the lowland, the king's residence also reproduced the cosmic geography, but on a much smaller scale. Its location at the confluence of four rivers and the associated phenomenon of the Tonle Sap River's annual reversed flow made the place a holy site. While it is difficult to always reconstruct the exact location and timeframe, historical records (some of which are fictitious) point to at least four royal residences located around this exceptional site: Lovea Em, Koh Slaket, Koh Khlok (whose position was more upstream along the Mekong), and Phnom Penh (Mak, 1995). After each of these relocations, the royal capital needed to be re-rooted. The palace and royal *wat* (Buddhist temple) were placed at the crossing of two visual axes, which determined the world's symbolic focus, with a third, the spiritual cosmic axis, raised to connect Heaven and Earth. Similar to a village headman leading his clan to establish a new settlement, the king too had to delineate the royal domain and erect his palace. Topographical considerations and ceremonies performed by the divine monarch (*devaraja*) and by commoners influenced the location of the built environment at sites with good practical and spiritual energy. On these grounds, the perfect spot for a royal residence, which a ritual specialist determined, could become the entire state's political gravitation point. This *galactic* or *solar polity* represented the geometric connection between the microcosm (city, temple, home) and the macrocosm (the eternal) in cardinal orthogonality. Space, especially the urban form, was designed to mimic the cosmos as a hierarchical example of the secular order on earth (see Figure 1).

These royal towns were river-port polities, similar to other land-locked port cities of peninsular Southeast Asia, such as Ayutthaya and early Thonburi/Bangkok (Kathirithamby-Wells and Villiers, 1990). Like these cities, the Cambodian post-Angkorian emporia were created to secure more effective control of local and long-distance trading patterns, small-scale production, monopolies, and taxes. The significance of the single Central Place (the royal residence) as the political, cultural, economic, and military center of the kingdom remained unchanged, but the port cities lacked a wider rural hinterland and the old Khmer empire's centripetal force. There is also evidence that both the central and the local plans continued to shape the residential areas' building activities and the hard infrastructure, which refers to

Figure 1: Locating the right spot for the royal capital; Left side: Location and approx. outline of the early post-Angkorian capitals (O) Udong and Longvek North-West of Phnom Penh. The Holy Mountain represents the spiritual navel of the world. Right side: Phnom Penh in the 1860s at the Les Quatre Bras (Caturmukh), the confluence of four river arms. The monsoon regime causes the annual flow reversal of the Tonle Sap River.



Source: Author's own draft based on Mikaelian (2009) and plans of the National Archives of Cambodia

the fundamental facilities that allowed these capitals to function. If Angkor's urban complex could be said to feature the "designs of kings and farmers" (Hawken, 2013), then Phnom Penh tells the construction history of kings and farmers, colonial officers and "colonized" city dwellers, "irrealsocialist de-urbanizers," and, more recently, of politically well-connected developers, squatters, and urban newcomers (Kolnberger, 2014a, 2015a; cf. Mikaelian, 2009; Tambiah, 1977; Malville and Gujral, 2000; Népote, 1973).

## Phnom Penh and French rule

In 1863, the kingdom became a protectorate of France. After the court's move from Udong to the "quatre bras" (four arms in French) in 1865/66, Phnom Penh became the king's (re)new(ed) royal seat. In general, royal Khmer cities of the post-Angkorian time had two distinct major morphological districts: the palace quarter and the civil town. In and around the palace, the king's extensive family and his retainers formed a royal household and royal administration housed in a compact and concentric arrangement of buildings. In contrast, the commoners settled in linear-type "civil lines." In Phnom Penh, the civil town stretched mainly along the banks of the Tonle Sap River. Various social mechanisms and the physical characteristics of the plots of land buttressed the royal town's dual character. Royal rule and sovereignty were based on a physical inner circle, with the king as the pater familias: one could gain – or lose – everything by being close to the king.

To create an appropriate space, ditches, drainage canals, and retention basins ensured that the palatial-sacral complex's location was flood-proof, which provided valuable building lots. The "civil town" housed the commercial district – "Cambodia's bazaar," as visitors disparagingly described it. A compact formation, similar to that of the palace, emerged around the main market. In this perennial town concept, there was no strict division between the urban and the rural. Agricultural production surrounded radially the small urban core and most houses along the river front(s) had kitchen gardens and smaller (horticultural) provision grounds (*chamcar*) (see Figure 2). They provided the local markets with victuals and other goods (e.g. silk or spices). Cambodia's once single urban area not only serves, but also relies on its proximity to rural production. This pattern of cultivation in concentric rings or belts around a single city center recalls a tropical version of von Thünen's model, which is based on agricultural land use and transportation cost. As was typical of a royal residence and its function as a center of consumption and redistribution, the workshops of craftsmen, who were purveyors to the court, were concentrated here, close to a high density of regular customers.

In the 1860s to 1880s, the town remained a very modest settlement, despite being the Protectorate's capital and royal residence, consisting mainly of two long rows of wooden dwellings (the *Grand Rue*) along one of the two parallel NE-SW-routes, which merchants and the king's followers mostly used. Phnom Penh's urban landscape had a pronounced elongated layout with liminal-aquatic characteristics. The houses, most on stilts, were lined up on natural or artificial elevations and causeways, surrounded by flowing or standing (or stagnant) water. Annual changes in the monsoon climate

were responsible for an extreme hydraulic regime, causing the periodically rising or falling profile of a typical tidal town and its urban wetlands (Kolnberger, 2014a: 49, 92f.; Molyvann, 2003).

Figure 2: House plot and rice fields: topographical land use map and terrain profile (ideal-typical)



Source: Author's own draft

*Legend:*

**(A)** the phum or village, a Khmer expression which designates any inhabited land regardless of size, form or ethnic composition, is aligned along an all-weather road with ditches. Houses are not to be sited on the centre of the plot (i.e. the “navel of the land” or phchet phum) for (a) ritual precaution and for (b) practical reasons because constructions need to be above the seasonal high flood of running and standing waters. The linear drainage of the road provides some additional protection.

**(B)** the wat (the Buddhist temple and monastery) with a beng (pond, natural or artificial) and its sacral enclosure.

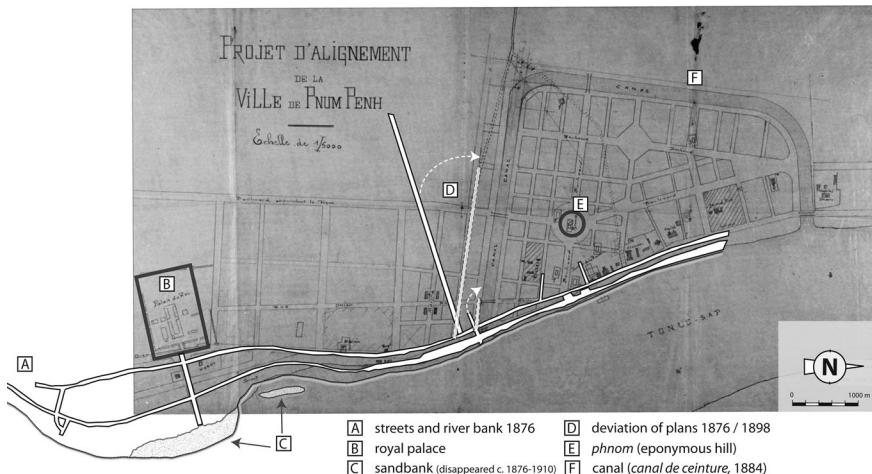
- (1) the rice fields (sre) along a prek riverbed that seasonally fills and flows after sufficient rain fall and/or after overflow water has entered from the main riverbed. Here, the village people have extended this prek with cut-off canals for better irrigation.
- (2) the house plot east of the road offers terrain for riparian market gardens (cham-car), eventually, or small rice fields (flood-retreat farming). Hand-irrigation during dry season (monsoon low tide) is facile. For this reason, the plots west of the road are disadvantaged during that season.
- (3) secondary dirt roads and foot trails
- (4) the all-weather road bordered by ditches for drainage. Rural road networks are the life-lines for the country side. To border on a segment of it is like having a shop window for displaying goods and services (often an extra vendor hut is set up beside the road).
- (5) a prek is in most cases a human-made canal, having been dug by locals (here with high and low watermarks) to extend the annual inundation in a controlled manner.
- (6) the river with high water and low water level and flooding zone.

Over the next decades until the years between the World Wars, the kernel of a compact city with a denser and more rectilinear layout began to emerge (see Figure 3). The river-banks were stabilized to secure the waterfront, thus creating a straight-lined building frontage, a main causeway, and a river harbor site, while land reclamations progressively formed a flat, artificial platform, used as a site to build a tropical French town. “Polderization” – the complete drainage of square-shaped fields, unusual in the Khmer building tradition, provided more building sites. This land was porous enough to absorb heavy precipitation, which the paved surfaces that the colonial power had started constructing, could not (Pierdet, 2008). From the mid-1880s, the French colonial administration planned and executed hydraulic modernization by digging a U-shaped canal (the “Canal de P[h]nom-Penh” or “Canal intérieur” completed in 1894, but, like most of the inner-city watercourses, only filled later) around the northern part to demarcate the “white” colonial city. Most of the colonial administration’s buildings and the civil ones were concentrated here. This quarter also housed the “respectable” part of the European colonial society. Typical of Western colonialism, Phnom Penh became a dual city with two urban foci: the palace and the “white” administrative town. In between, a third center emerged – the market area.

To the south, a trench separated the well-designed central market area. Fueled by capital and investment from Indochina and other parts of Asia, this market became the pulsating economic heart of the city and of the Protectorate. Inhabitants with a Chinese background dominated in this quarter, whereas, further south, a mixed court society of – in the ethnic nomenclatura of the period – “Cambodians” (meaning ethnic Khmer; “Cambodia” is an anglicization of the French “Cambodge,” which in turn is the French transliteration of the Khmer-word “Kampuchea”), Sino-Khmers, Europeans, Chinese (all southern Chinese dialect groups), Vietnamese (“Annamites”), Siamese, Filipinos, Laotians, and Cham-Malays built their settlements around the king’s palace.

The percentage of Europeans never surpassed 1.5% of the urban population. Phnom Penh, with its approximately 30,000 inhabitants during last two decades of the nineteenth century, represented a somewhat *plural society* by encompassing different communities with unrelated cultural backgrounds in a dual colonial city, whose marketplace

Figure 3: The “rectification” of a Khmer royal city



Source: Author's draft based on National Archives of Cambodia (NAC), Résident Supérieur du Cambodge (RSC): Projet d'alignement de la Ville de Pnum Penh, NAC/RSC 24126, 1898 and Avant-projet de protection des berges du Tonlé Sap – Défense de la rive droite au droit du Palais du Roi, NAC/RSC 10246/2-4, 1876.

grew into the dominant organizing force for the division of labor (Furnivall, 1980; Müller, 2006: 59). Notwithstanding this diversity, common bonds did exist and the French began a process of social engineering by restructuring the Khmer regime's urban foundation as a new French colonial one. In keeping with the zoning plans, Phnom Penh and the other sub-central places of colonial Cambodia (residences of the district administration) were planned as compact cities with an orthogonal layout, a high residential density, and mixed land uses (Sreang, 2004). Nations can be “imagined”, states cannot; the state had to be materially engineered. To improve the colonial presence, a city-cum-roads scheme was launched in Phnom Penh and later expanded to impose a physical French presence on the entire Protectorate (Edwards, 2006; Del Testa, 1999).

## The equifinal layout of the colonial capital

On paper, French municipal authorities planned as they did in France. In Cambodia, the French urbanization process was Janus-faced. On the one hand, the colonial government turned a blind eye to some spontaneous, “illegal” settlements, also deliberately refraining from developing specific spaces. On the other hand, other areas – especially the inner-city parts – were closely monitored. Two planning agendas were at work: (1) spontaneous building, which aggregated into a morphological order similar to the (2) French officials' mapped city planning. Together, these agendas formed an orthogonal city tissue. However, the spontaneous (indigenous) building activity “from below” excluded, directed, and partially impeded the (French) plans “from above”. Capi-

tal-intensive engineering (e.g. canals, large-scale landfills, and drainage) that the very same town authority had provided, ensured an attractive building site for spontaneous settlements.

Development costs played a major role, because construction work was difficult and expensive in swampy areas; however, the people who had lived there for years or decades greatly facilitated the city's official extension. The French authorities could not forgo these half-ready prepared grounds and decided to specifically develop these areas in order to save infrastructural costs and to demonstrate order by rebuilding quarters that had originally been considered out of reach. The reality of Phnom Penh's street morphology emerged from two contingent practices in an equifinal way to form a slightly irregular checker-board composite.

By establishing zones of higher or lower control, the French reproduced their patch-work of direct and indirect rule over the colony on a smaller scale in Phnom Penh. Their colonial government only shared overlord-ship with the Khmer king at the very beginning, before mounting a colonial *coup d'état* by threatening military action in 1884 (Osborne, 1997). The timing of this coup was no coincidence, as France – the colonial homeland – witnessed a concurrent shift to even more direct state rule, also using land registration to achieve this. Before the French intervention, land had formally belonged to the king as the "lord of all the lands and water". However, the people could enjoy the right of possession if they publicly demonstrated that they were cultivating the adjacent land, building houses, fencing off plots, and generally occupying the land continuously and peacefully. In contrast, in the French period, all immovable property had to be registered in the cadastre in order to be legal (Kleinpeter, 1937; Land Law of Cambodia, 2003; Hel, 2008). Spatial micromanagement became a key factor in the enforcement of government power while land and concessions became the key-resource in the colony's urban economy (Slocomb, 2010) – and part of the kingdom's contradictory modernization (Korff, 2010a).

### **"Perle de l'Extrême-Orient": Independence and the reign of Sihanouk (1953-1970)**

In colonial times, Phnom Penh was unquestionably the Protectorate's primary city, although the town only ranked as a secondary metropole within French Indochina's urban hierarchy. On becoming the capital of an independent nation-state in 1953/54, Phnom Penh's domestic position as the disproportionately largest and most important municipality in the kingdom increased rapidly. Typical of newly decolonized metropoles, the city's (regular) population peaked after a sharp upswing at more than half a million just 20 years later. During the 60-year French colonial era, the population growth had been slow and only very gradual as Phnom Penh's population was around 42,000 in 1904, rising to approximately 100,000 in the last years before independence in 1953/54. In the 1950s and 1960s, Phnom Penh also became more *khmerized*, due to the growing share of native Cambodians – mainly the influx of newcomers from the countryside – which increased from 46% in 1912 to 62% in 1959. The 20% Chinese (28% in 1912) and 17% Vietnamese (24% in 1912) formed the next two largest ethnic urban groups (Koln-

berger, 2014a: 534; CAS, 2009). Phnom Penh's expansion was, however, an indicator of the continuous imbalance in the country's development; in other words, the persistency of a single, progressive/privileged urban core and a lagging rural periphery. Over 90 percent of Cambodia's total population (5.7 million in 1962) lived in the countryside. A similar persistence also applied to the urbanization: The resumption of the French *grand* scheme characterized the urban planning "polderization", especially the waterfronts of the Tonle Sap and Bassac Rivers, on one hand, and the spontaneous and planned building activities that extended the existing street grid, on the other hand. During the first Sihanouk (1955 to 1970) administration decades, known as *Sangkum*, Phnom Penh changed its appearance significantly from a "vegetal" to a "mineral" city. Reinforced concrete (a French invention) became the construction material of choice, while the Cambodian version of the Chinese shophouse (narrow, multi-storied buildings, facing the main streets with a single multifunctional room for business on the ground floor) became the center's dominant residential building type.

The building-obsessed king Norodom, abdicating the throne and his sacral office to become the politically more active prince Sihanouk and flamboyant head of state (1955-70), improved and beautified his capital with representative edifices and monuments such as administrative buildings, a new palace (the extensive *Chamkar Mon Compound*), and a landmark-building at the river crossing *C(h)aturmukh*. This catch-up development of a self-determining state gave rise to a particular modernist-vernacular style, currently called *New Khmer Architecture* (Grant Ross and Collins, 2006), as the tangible part of Cambodia's Cultures of Independence (Daravuth and Muan, 2001).

With some justification, it can be argued that the French cultivation of a Cambodian nation in the long shadow of Angkor's unique heritage and in ethno-political demarcation from their Thai, Vietnamese, and Laotian neighbors, continued as a nation-building exercise under the aegis of a charismatic leader. After a hopeful start, however, things turned sour. Despite notable achievements, particularly in respect of infrastructures – 225 km of streets in Phnom Penh alone (Uk, 1975) – and education, the Sihanouk government failed in one sensitive key-area: providing sustainable economic growth for the broader redistribution of income and wealth. As in other postcolonial administrations in Southeast Asia, Sihanouk had to rally as many retainers behind him as possible, which inevitably provoked conflicts between rent-seekers and modernist technocrats (Korff, 2010b). In this crisis, a nepotistic *crony socialism* (Khatri et al., 2005) emerged, and Sihanouk rewarded his most loyal retainers with privileges and income, especially from the pool of lucrative state monopolies. Vann Molyvann's famous housing projects at the Bassac River Front, for example, were primarily earmarked for state and city employees. This socio-political drift was an eerily similar historical *déjà-vu* of the merging of state, bureaucracy, and economy under one umbrella – the precolonial palace economy. The unanswered question is still whether this development, if it had overcome the structural and financial, fiscal and commercial calamity, could have led to a Cambodia as a newly industrialized country. In retrospect, Sangkum-Cambodia was running out time – the Vietnam War was increasingly dragging the kingdom into its destructive orbit.

## The besieged city and refugee camp (1970-1975)

The First Indochina War (1946-1954) spared Cambodia. This war of independence against the French colonial power was mainly fought in Vietnam and decided in the northern part of the country. The Second Indochina War (Vietnam War, 1955-1975) was different. Its main theatre of war and insurgency moved to the south and closer to Cambodia – too close for a non-aligned country to maintain a sideshow position (Shawcross, 1979). Ultimately, Sihanouk's seesaw policy between "pro-US" and "pro-Viet Cong" forces within his country and in foreign politics was unable to keep Cambodia out of the conflict. In 1963, the Prince – now head of state, after abdicating the crown in 1955 – cut the considerable American subsidies (USAID) – the last financial lifeline – which worsened the political and economic crisis. A palace revolution-cum-military putsch was launched, which deposed Sihanouk, who left the country. The new self-proclaimed Khmer Republic (1970-75), realigned with the United States, was short-lived and ruled over an ever-shrinking territory. In the end, it only held Phnom Penh, which fell on April 17, 1975 to the Khmer Rouge. During this time, the urban population of Phnom Penh had more than doubled from around 630,000 in 1969 to around two million in 1975. The city had become a large refugee site. The only government-initiated construction measure of this time worth mentioning was a circum-urban dam and causeway, which defined the municipality's new outer periphery. It also served as a trench and military demarcation line. The space within its perimeter soon filled up with refugees from the countryside fleeing the advancing Khmer Rouge and the US carpet bombing devastation. Paradoxically, bomber fleets designed to turn cities into rubble now turned the flat agrarian countryside virtually upside down (the total payload dropped over Cambodia in order to stop the advance of the Khmer Rouge-guerilla, made Cambodia the probably most heavily bombed country in history). In the capital's deceptive safety, the evacuees and displaced persons practiced dispersed urban self-settlement in open spaces and, in the center, used the built-up area's interstices. These people also set up self-settled camps or formed grouped settlements in concentric densities within the urban fringe, replicating an entire support system in a makeshift economy. Nevertheless, this last island was finally over-run by the Khmer Rouge, led by the general secretary of the Communist party of Kampuchea (Cambodia), Pol Pot.

## The end of the "city of parasites"

Contrary to the commonly held belief, the Khmer Rouge were neither anti-urban *per se*, nor did they practice *urbicide*, which "entails the destruction of buildings as the constitutive elements of urbanity" (Coward, 2008: 43). Phnom Penh's physical substance (and that of the other towns taken) remained untouched with two exceptions: the Catholic cathedral destroyed as an ideological and anti-colonial statement, while the explosive charge used to provide entry into the National Bank vault was poorly calculated, damaging the building beyond repair. On the other hand, urbanity, urban life, was brutally halted. Within days, two million refugees and original residents were forcefully evicted and systematically dispersed over the countryside for the following two reasons.

First, the relatively small guerrilla force could neither control nor provide for a million-strong group of people concentrated in one place. Second, besides such practical and security-related considerations, ideological motives justified the “evacuation”. The Khmer Rouge leadership thought of this urban population as parasites and the enemy of the real people. After the final “reboot” of the society, the Khmer Rouge aimed to re-inhabit the towns with ideologically purified people. “Let’s turn the countryside into a town [...] and] he who has rice possesses all” (Locard, 2004: 96; 227) are the two Khmer Rouge mottos that, besides echoing thoughts of Mao Zedong, encapsulate the crux of their plans: forced ruralization and the abrupt modernization of agriculture to create a solid base for the extra great leap forward to socialism, industrialization, and unimpeded progress. The “irrealsocialist planned economy” with collectivization, dam, and irrigation projects failed miserably. People starved, died from diseases, and exhaustion, which aggravated and intensified the ongoing Khmer Rouge *politicide* (Clavero, 2008: 113ff; see Kolnberger, 2014a: 305ff; cf. Locard, 2004; Kiernan, 1996; Bultmann, 2015; 2017).

As for Phnom Penh, following the occupation the urban territory was divided into zones of influence under various Khmer Rouge fractions, which was never as tight and streamlined an organization as the Viet Minh/Viet Cong. This initial division was short-lived, perhaps only existing on paper, and the guerilla movement’s most brutal dog of war, Ta Mok, and his “Nirdey” (the group of the North-West Zone) took full control. They protected Pol Pot and the inner circle of the new regime’s residence and headquarters. Phnom Penh as capital of Democratic Kampuchea – the new official state name – was never completely abandoned, but heavily extensified. According to various estimations, between five and 20 thousand people remained to maintain the basic infrastructure, form a garrison, and work at some of the production sites (Martin, 1983). The regime’s most infamous and important “interrogation center”, the Tuol Sleng-Security Prison (S-21), a transit station to death for more than 18,000 “convicts”, was located in the southern part of the city and was another reason for people remaining (Chandler, 1999). Finally, the town functioned as a Potemkin village, the representative stage of the regime for its very limited diplomatic exchange and carefully selected visitors.

## The garrisoned town

The poor supply situation and paranoid purges ravaged the Khmer Rouge’s own rank and file. Their hypernationalistic ethnic cleansings, particularly against “Vietnamese colonizers”, and their plans to reconquer the Khmer Krom’s historical settlement area, although they were then living in the south-western part of Vietnam (*Cochinchina*), led to a complete political break with Hanoi. After multiple border skirmishes, troops of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (since 1976) launched an invasion against the Pol Pot regime. They liberated and occupied most of Cambodia in a swift military operation during the dry winter monsoon of 1978/79 and pushed the Khmer Rouge, and the population still under its control, into the highlands. The proclaimed People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK, 1979-1991) became a protectorate of communist Vietnam, while the Khmer Rouge reverted its tactics to guerrilla warfare once again (during the Cambodian-Vietnamese War as part of the Third Indochina War, 1975-1989). Following the Vietnamese occupa-

tion, a half-crescent semi-urbanized ribbon of refugees and military camps formed along the Thai border. During the 1980 and 1990s, the population of these sites, perhaps 300,000 people, constituted the power base of the various civil war parties opposing the new regime in Phnom Penh (Thibault, 2005). Hostility to the PRK-government, protected by Vietnam and sponsored by the Soviet Union, was the only common denominator of the probably weirdest coalition at the end of the Cold War, including the genocidal Khmer Rouge siding with the imperialistic USA and 'the West'.

Selected urban spaces and their initially hand-picked population were also the main resources of the nascent PRK government in Phnom Penh. In support of this original accumulation of political power, the supreme administrative authorities of the People's Republic established their headquarters in the former government district close to the riverside. Some of the reasons for this move are obvious: the buildings were originally constructed for such a purpose and the site was also the former prestigious heart of the city as it included the adjacent National Museum, Palace, and Silver Pagoda (Wat Preah Keo). It is no coincidence that the most influential figure in present-day Cambodia and the longest-serving head of government, Hun Sen, picked a house facing the much-admired Independence Monument. Other motives for the choice may be linked to exception and martial law governing the state. First, the district offered ample scope for gated communities, which could support each other during a siege or Khmer Rouge counteroffensive. Second, short distances facilitated communications and minimized the leaders' risk of exposure during their meetings. Third, the rest of the slowly resettling city formed a security buffer against the outside, while the inner kernel of political power became a high-security zone – which is currently still in place. The various ministerial compounds became trading grounds for loyalty, which turned them into gravity fields for socio-political networks. Initially, the government monitored the repopulation closely, but the process could not be hindered and the capital's population increased exponentially from several thousands in 1979 to about half a million in 1988.

With the end of the Cold War, the support for the anti-communist coalition, including the Khmer Rouge, vanished. The Vietnamese left in September 1989. With peace in sight, and after a transitional phase supervised by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC, 1992-1993), the communist economic system was dismantled in favor of the principles of a free market economy in progress. The monarchy was restored in 1993 (second reign of Norodom Sihanouk), however as a ceremonial kingdom only. The concentration of power in the office of the king was confined and all authority remained in the hands of the government established after the UNTAC sponsored elections. The early 1990s became a period of strategic exploitation and valorization for reasons of profit, and all social strata, from the smallest to the largest businesses, became involved in the capitalization of landed property. As the direct successor of the Communist Party, the CPP (Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party) was the big winner, particularly after the political clashes in 1997. Its property, initially all its urban real estate, was officially "privatized" and the party's capital has surpassed that of all its political contenders ever since (Kolnberger 2014a: 325ff.; 2015b; Luciolli, 1988; Gottesman, 2002; Slocomb, 2002; Carrier, 2007).

## Developer playground and the return of the infamous “One Percent”

Cambodia's endless international and internal armed conflicts had an exceptional social levelling effect with the state failure, mass mobilization, civil warfare, the Khmer Rouge's transformative revolution, the abolition of private property, the Khmer Rouge's *politicide*, ethnic cleansings, and mass starvation effectively deurbanizing the population and degrading education. These events made the surviving population more homogeneous and *khmerized* than ever before. Income inequality was specifically reduced (Scheidel, 2017: 231f.). With the need to “camp-in” and share billeted living space gradually diminishing, the Socialist moral economy mutated into quick money politics and political family business, ensuring the hegemonic status of the very few. In the early 1990s, the (re)privatization of property and profits from collective resources separated the wheat from the chaff in terms of political connections. State and town authorities had already undertaken a first wave of eviction in the late 1980s, which resumed in waves in the 1990s and 2000s. According to the UN World Urbanization Prospects (2017), urban space has become ever scarcer and more valuable, with the population increasing fourfold from the 1990s to reach 1.9 million in 2018.

The considerable damage to the infrastructure (especially flood control on the river embankments) and housing, due to neglect and small-scale vandalism during the Khmer Rouge era and subsequently during the first years following their reign of terror, was repaired and upgraded, mainly during and after the UN-peacekeeping mission. Since then, the face of the city has changed considerably. Capital has visibly returned to Phnom Penh. As in other Southeast Asian capitals, small was, architecturally speaking, replaced with big, timber with cement, tiles with glass; the vernacular style with various *khmerized* interpretation of post-modern architecture. Topographically speaking, the flat town gained height when skyscraping started in the mid-2000s, superelevating the (four-faced) tower of the throne hall in the royal palace compound, the unwritten benchmark for building height since French colonial times. Morphologically speaking, the gridiron concept has been extended. However, an increasing number of satellite cities with mixed residential and business use are being constructed around the historical kernel, giving Phnom Penh's urban agglomeration a more polynuclear character. Economically speaking, Phnom Penh has a low-density industrialization, with garment (manu)factories mushrooming on the periphery (since 2006 the Special Economic Zone). In 2017, Phnom Penh's bicycle assembling-industry, fueled by Cambodia's duty-free access to Europe, surpassed Taiwan as the EU's top bike supplier. Investors, predominantly of Chinese origin and owning 90% of the foreign capital, take advantage of the low wages and social standards, as well as the favorable terms of trade with preferential market access to the EU and the US markets. As the kingdom's largest export earner (78% of the merchandise in 2016), the textiles and shoe sector is the main non-agrarian employer with over 600,000 workers in more than 600 factories.

Hydrologically speaking, the city is now drained, and nearly all inner-city swamps, wetlands, and (ephemeral) watercourses have disappeared, providing terrain for housing and industrial estates. As a kind of urban micro water management, traditional Khmer planning needed to be loose and open, a concept that Vann Molyvann, Cambodia's foremost architect and planner of the Sangkum-era (1953-70), adapted

successfully to create the first modern Phnom Penh. In terms of the human capital, the universities and colleges of various standards established for a young generation of city dwellers are booming. Regarding the material culture and consumption, Phnom Penh is now definitely part of the modern world, having been transformed from a city of pedestrians, bikers, and motorized two-wheelers into a city that favors four wheels and has to deal with congested traffic in public spaces (Shatkin, 1998; Kelly and McGee, 2003; Osborne, 2008; Nam, 2011; Paling, 2012; Kolnberger, 2012a, 2012b; Percival and Waley, 2012; Fauveaud, 2014).

## Conclusion

Since French colonial times, Phnom Penh has been the pivot of Cambodia's history. Aside from its disproportional size and its political and economic influence, its role as the country's primary city has taken precedence in respect of all other aspects too, such as it being a media, culture, education, and internal migration center. There was a change from a *galactic* to a more centralized polity: from a core and a loose enclosing space arranged around a center (mandala pattern) to a more centripetal pattern. In Cambodia, this development was initiated by the colonial authorities, nationwide infrastructure initiatives and the hard border-policy of the French. Sihanouk continued to implement modern state-principles. In one way, Cambodia's nation-building project was very successful. The Khmer-Cambodian national identity (around 98% of the population of 16.5 million in 2019) became firmly rooted in the minds of elites and ordinary citizens alike. Linguistic and religious homogeneity and the experience of enduring a troublesome past are further favorable conditions for the potential "take off" to become a modern state. However, the current government's prestige of bringing peace to the country as the once most desired public good is running out: the promise of political participation and equal access to resources is broken. Today, there is also a clear bias in public goods provision between city and countryside, which was hampered not only by the lack of institutional capacity but also by the resurgence of clientelism. Phnom Penh has also remained the unchallenged main trading ground for patronage, as well as for a "culture of corruption and impunity" (Osborne, 2008: 195). This is the dark side and the price that apparently needs to be paid for peace and stability after the recent nightmarish past. Corruption is also the consequence of the city's social (dis)organization, which resulted from the struggle for scarce urban resources, particularly housing. The role of location, the socio-spatial organizing of the city into preferred neighborhoods close to orbits of political power cannot be understated nor underestimated. However, the city's unchallenged command and control function, and, therefore, that of the country's elite, is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain given the growing and diversifying young population and their expectations for a fair future.

Cambodia's urbanization rate of 23% (2018) is still comparatively low (e.g., Laos 35%, Vietnam 36%, and Thailand 50% according to The World Bank). Currently, only four other municipalities surpass the population mark of 200,000 by contrast with the more than two million in the capital. Urban economic growth stimulated by a population increase and foreign capital, cannot, however, endure indefinitely. The development of

Phnom Penh's urban growth has attracted capital, some of it of very dubious origins, looking for short-term profit – and a reserve army of labor to fill the factories. This influx and tourism stimulated the demand for construction, while the poverty-ridden countryside has to struggle with inadequate basic infrastructure. So far, most of the foreign aid and NGO investments and projects have been concentrated on Phnom Penh. These diverging trends recall the old urban studies question: Is the primate city parasitic? (London, 1977; Gottdiener et al., 2016).

Phnom Penh's generative function in terms of the rest of the country is and was low. The heralded benefits of modern urbanization, such as the agglomeration of human capital and economic benefits have coincided with higher housing costs, marked disparities in living conditions, a widening gap between rich and poor, and higher risks of crime or congestion. From a historical perspective, it is clear that two rural transformations reinforced this development. First, the French colonial intervention put an end to the overlapping margins of sovereignty that characterized traditional rule in Southeast Asia (Matras-Guin and Taillard, 1992). Hard borders and less soft boundaries began to define the making of the Cambodian territoriality, both externally (in relation to the neighboring polities) and internally (in relation to the political administration and land property rights). Today, Cambodia's foreign policy focuses on establishing friendly borders with its neighbors, while remaining very rigid in terms of domestic real estate issues. Second, Cambodia is in the middle of a transition from a land of abundance to a land scarcity (Rigg, 2003, 2013). The land no longer belongs to its tiller as traditional occupational rights were lost. In other words, the country has lost a historical "social safety valve". This second factor leaves much of the rural population with, more or less, just one option – migration either to Phnom Penh or abroad in search for work.

As Stanley Tambiah (1977) once commented the change in Thailand "from a *galactic* to a more centralized *radial* polity that is by no means modern in the Western sense", this could also be said of Cambodia's more recent history, which is an example for a genuine path into *Modernity* as a multiple phenomenon. Phnom Penh's morphological trajectory and urban development proves the case.

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