

# Phnom Penh and its lost battle for the preservation of historic buildings from the 1970's

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## ភ្នំពេញនិងការប្រយុទ្ធជោយអស់សង្ឃឹមក្នុងការថែរក្សាបេតិកភ័ណ្ណ

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ទីក្រុងភ្នំពេញ គឺជាទីក្រុងសំបូរទៅដោយអាគារបេតិកភ័ណ្ណ ជាបង្អួចដែលបន្សល់ទុកមកតាំងពីសម័យអាណានិគមនិយមចារឹក រហូតដល់សតវត្សទី ១៩ មកម្ល៉េះ ។ សំណង់បេតិកភ័ណ្ណទាំងនេះ ត្រូវបានកាន់កាប់ ដោយគ្រឹះស្ថានរដ្ឋាភិបាល និងខ្លះទៀតកាន់កាប់ដោយបុគ្គលឯកជន ។ អាគារបេតិកភ័ណ្ណទាំងនោះត្រូវបានអ្នកកាន់កាប់ ដែលជាម្ចាស់កម្មសិទ្ធិនៃអចលនវត្ថុទាំងនោះកែច្នៃ ឬ វាយកំទេចចោលអាគារទាំងនោះ រួចយកដីទ្វាររបស់អចលនវត្ថុទាំងនោះទៅធ្វើការសាងសង់ជាអាគារដែលគេអាចធ្វើអាជីវកម្មយកផលកំរៃចំណេញមកវិញបានច្រើនជាងរក្សាទុកប្រើប្រាស់អាគារបេតិកភ័ណ្ណទាំងនោះ ។ គួរតែកត់សំគាល់ថា អាគារបេតិកភ័ណ្ណទាំងនោះដែលបាត់បង់រូបរាងទៅហើយនោះ ភាគច្រើនអន្តរាយយ៉ាងច្រើននៅក្នុងអំឡុងពេលពីឆ្នាំ ១៩៩១ ដល់ឆ្នាំ ១៩៩៣ គឺជាពេលដែលប្រទេសកម្ពុជាធ្វើការរៀបចំបោះឆ្នោតដោយសេរីលើកទី ១ ។ រៀងរាល់កាលនោះដែលជាសម័យអន្តរកាលនៅប្រទេសកម្ពុជា ម្ចាស់អចលនវត្ថុបេតិកភ័ណ្ណបានធ្វើការវាយកំទេចចោលអាគារទាំងនោះ រួចហើយសាងសង់ជាថ្មីវិញនូវភូមិគ្រឹះ សណ្ឋាគារ ផ្ទះសំណាក់

និង រោងនីយដ្ឋាន ដើម្បីជួល និងធ្វើអាជីវកម្មដល់បុគ្គលិកអង្គការសហប្រជាជាតិរាប់ពាន់នាក់ ដែលមកជួយរៀបចំនិងត្រួតពិនិត្យការងារបោះឆ្នោតនៅប្រទេសកម្ពុជា ។ ទោះបីជាសកម្មភាពបំផ្លិចបំផ្លាញបេតិកភ័ណ្ណទាំងនោះ មានការថយចុះច្រើននៅពេលបច្ចុប្បន្ន ក៏ពុំមានន័យថាអាគារបេតិកភ័ណ្ណដែលនៅសេសសល់ទាំងនោះនឹងមានសុវត្ថិភាពទៅអនាគតនោះឡើយ ព្រោះប្រទេសកម្ពុជាក៏ដូចជាអង្គការទីក្រុងភ្នំពេញពុំទាន់មានច្បាប់ ឬលក្ខន្តិកៈច្បាស់លាស់ក្នុងការថែរក្សានិងទប់ស្កាត់ការកំទេចចោលឬកែច្នៃទាំងស្រុងនូវអាគារបេតិកភ័ណ្ណទាំងនោះអោយបានច្បាស់លាស់ឡើយ ។ ហេតុដូច្នោះហើយគួរតែអង្គការអន្តរជាតិនានា និងបណ្តាប្រទេសផ្តល់ជំនួយទាំងអស់ជួយជ្រោមជ្រែងឧបត្ថម្ភដល់ការងារថែរក្សាបេតិកភ័ណ្ណនេះទាំងផ្នែកបច្ចេកទេស និង ថវិកា ដើម្បីរក្សាអោយបានគង់វង់នូវកេរ្តិ៍តំណែលស្ថាបត្យកម្មដ៏វិសេសវិសាលទាំងនោះ ដែលពុំមែនតែជាស្នាដៃរបស់ប្រជាជនកម្ពុជាតែម្នាក់នោះទេ ក៏ប៉ុន្តែជាស្នាដៃដែលតំណាងអោយសមិទ្ធិផលរបស់មនុស្សជាតិគ្រប់រូប ដែលរស់នៅលើផែនដីយើងនេះ ។

Phnom Penh, which was founded and established by King Ponhea Yat after the fall of Angkor (around 1431), was not the permanent capital of the kingdom until 1863 when King Norodom moved into Phnom Penh from the previous capital city of Oudong - about 60 km south-west of the former. In its early days, the city consisted of huts and a floating wooden shanty town, apart from the Phnom monastery and perhaps the important royal estates (Munson et al: 1968; Igout: 1993). The city became fully developed during (then-Prince) Norodom Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum government in the 1960s and enjoyed a remarkable reputation as «Paris of the Far East» or «The Pearl of South East Asia» (Igout: 1993). Compared to major cities of other countries, the city has experienced dramatic population changes since its creation.

Hong et al: 1973), to only a few thousands between 1975 and 1979 during the Khmer Rouge's reign (H. E. Kry Beng Hong, 1993). It increased again to around 1 million in 1996 (the author's own estimation based on the previous year's statistics).

Many historical buildings such as those built during the French protectorate with sophisticated French and Khmer decoration and design were refitted or demolished in order to make way for modern-style hotels, apartments and restaurants, etc. There are many reasons behind the disappearance of historical buildings, but in principle, the main issues are political turmoil, the lack of law enforcement regarding housing and land use, as well as the abuse of power and wide spread poverty.

### POLITICAL CHANGES AND THE CITY DEVELOPMENT

During the American Indo-China War (Between 1970-early 1975), Phnom Penh experienced a higher level of population growth than ever before. The city's population increased from 600,000 in 1969 to 1,200,000 in 1972 (of whom approximately 800,000 were refugees) and to 1,500,000 in

The population of Phnom Penh city, due to many reasons such as changes in the country's political situation, had increased from 355,000 inhabitants in 1958 to 394,000 inhabitants during a time of peace in 1962. It then rose to around 900,000 in late 1969 before the Sihanouk government was toppled (Igout: 1993), to around 1.5 million in early 1975 during the American war in Indo-China (Kry Beng

the beginning of 1975 (Kry Beng Hong et al, 1973). The city was a shelter for migrants, most of whom had fled civil war in the countryside. With the largest share of its budget allocated to the military, the government could not do much, especially in supplying housing to meet such high demand. However, in the early years of this period, the state managed to develop some pieces of land and sold it to people at a subsidized price. According to the report of H. E. Kry Beng Hong, two main dikes were built. The first reclaimed 800 h.a. of land in 1970, followed by 6.400 h.a. with the second dike in 1972. This was the only credible development project of this period.

To worsen the situation, the problems relating to the already inadequate and ineffective housing, infrastructure and other services of the city were further exacerbated by this massive influx of newcomers. As Kry Beng Hong et al, (1973, p.8) argue: “Vacant lands in and around the city boundaries have been invaded by people who need shelter. Squatting has been going on at a large scale. About 20 per cent of city dwellers live in severe slum conditions.” It was at that time that government land and housing policies and regulations, as well as land ownership, were put aside or violated by newcomers in need of shelters. Both authorities and land owners felt sympathy toward squatters’ needs; and thus allowed them to settle on their land (although temporarily, they thought).

Correspondingly, any urbanisation and development programmes the government had planned before the civil war were abandoned under the circumstances, including slum and squatter clearances, a plan to build a new dike to reclaim between 5000 and 8000 hectares of land, and other housing programmes in the suburbs. According to the same study (Kry Beng Hong et al, 1973) only 250,000 of the total of 800,000 newcomers at the time were able to accommodate themselves. Of the remaining 550,000 newcomers, the study found around 200,000 squatted in the city and around 350,000 shared houses with relatives or friends in extremely overcrowded conditions. Moreover, this situation worsened when the civil war became critically fierce in the rural areas and spread close to the capital.

During the Khmer Rouge regime (Between 1975-early 1979), luxurious buildings, schools, universities, hospitals, churches and pagodas of all religions, and many other structures were regarded as symbols of feudalism and imperialism (Vickery, 1984). Of the city’s 122,000 houses (including concrete buildings, wooden structures with tile roofs and wooden structures with thatch roofs) before 1975, only 40,000 remained after 1979. Therefore, within the 3 years, eight

months and 20 days of the Pol Pot regime, 82,000 dwellings were destroyed through demolition or neglect (H.E. Kry Beng Hong, 1993). As a matter of course many of these buildings were demolished while others were purged and left to be destroyed by the weather. The city’s population, as mentioned early, was forcefully evacuated to rural areas and only a few thousand of the Khmer Rouge officials and workers were allowed to live in Phnom Penh ( H. E. Kry Beng Hong, 1993).

Maintenance of the city’s roads were almost abandoned by the new administration with the exception of those in constant use or that might be traveled by the small number of foreign visitors, such as Chinese delegations. Consequently, most of the paved roads dried out, cracked and were eventually destroyed by the weather. Roads with red gravel surfaces became muddy and eroded during rain and flood. Some roads were completely stripped by the Khmer Rouge to be used for vegetable gardens. Likewise, water supply and sewage systems were destroyed or left to be ruined by weather and neglect. River water was allowed to flow into the city’s sewage system regardless of the river’s high water level during the rainy seasons, causing the silting up of all drainage systems and constant flooding. Similarly, historical buildings (many of which were old and over used during the early period of civil war), were further deteriorated by the weather and lack of maintenance. Others were demolished by the Khmer Rouge in order to use the land for gardens or raising farm animals.

After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge Regime, from 1979 to 1989, all property remained in the hands of the state. The People’s Republic of Kampuchea government did however allow people to move back to the cities and re-occupy empty buildings and land, except those reserved for government utilities. At that time, it was impossible for the state to start any housing programmes for lack of finances. Most of the state budget and foreign aid was spent on food, medical facilities, and the rehabilitation of infrastructure and public services. There was no commercial property market and were no private companies involved in the land and housing market, since they were discouraged by the then-communist regime’s policies.

At the same time, all land and property ownership of any kind before 1979 (before the Khmer Rouge regime) were declared void by the government. No one could claim ownership to any property that belonged to them before 1979. The population only had the right of residence and perhaps maintenance. Although many buildings and houses were reutilized, there was little attention paid to maintenance

or preservation because the state had no financial ability. Thus, only cosmetic changes such as cleaning or wall painting with low quality paints were given to buildings and houses. However, since property exchange and sales were banned, most historical buildings were safe from commercial uses that could lead to demolition.

The time when most historical buildings were demolished or rebuilt was the period between 1991 and 1993 when Cambodia hosted tens of thousands of United Nations personnel who came to the country to organise the election. It began when the state adopted market economic policies and recognised private property rights. Property owners actively rebuilt their buildings hoping to rent to United Nations personnel. Even though the Municipality of Phnom Penh did its best to prevent historical buildings from being demolished, this was a time of uncertainty when many developers did whatever possible to make high returns from their property. Many buildings became new city cottages, restaurants, hotels, guest houses and apartments. It was a lost battle for the Municipality because during the transitional period political parties were campaigning for support and avoided any actions that could reduce their votes. Although the number of renovations and demolitions has since slowed down, there is still a danger of losing most of the city's historical buildings in the not so distant future, if concrete actions are not taken by the government and the Municipality.

### ***FUTURE TREND***

The future of historical buildings in Phnom Penh and in other parts of Cambodia does not look very promising. The lack of laws on housing and preservation for historical buildings, the widespread poverty of the country, and the traditional abuse of power contribute to the disappearance of historical buildings.

After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, most historical buildings were occupied by numerous families - especially buildings that were constructed in the form of apartments or large cottages. Thus, it is difficult for the many occupants to reach consensus with building maintenance plans.

The lack of political will by decision makers for instituting and enforcing preservation law coupled with the lack of government funding will contribute strongly to the disappearance of historical buildings. The government has many other concerns and priorities as well. Therefore, international organisations and foreign donor countries should make preservation issues a priority, or else Phnom Penh will lose much of its historical significance. These magnificent historical buildings belong not only to the Cambodian people but are symbols of human creativity and intelligence. Thus, preserving such important buildings should be a responsibility for all.