Although some Cambodians would rather forget their French history, their towns are still scattered with colonial remnants: broad boulevards, fountains, French buildings. Among these buildings are covered markets, stylishly designed structures, vibrant with life. However, as time has passed, and war and poverty have stricken Cambodia, they have fallen into disrepair, becoming Battered Beauties. Something must be done; but why should Cambodia, a country struggling to provide even the most basic needs, be bothered with the preservation of its colonial heritage? And more precisely, which aspects of these old markets should be preserved?

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TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS, two themes were studied: the market’s history – both indigenous and French – and their present-day functioning. Both themes will be discussed here.

Crows from one end to the other – the indigenous market

The original objectives of the Voyage d’Exploration en Indo-Chine, a French exploration of the Mekong between 1866 and 1868, were never met, as the Mekong appeared completely inadequate as a trading route between Siam and the wealthy Chinese province of Yunnan. However, the exploration proved useful in other respects, as local scenes were registered in numerous illustrations and texts, informing us of how markets functioned at that time. The market of Laos’ Luang Prabang was described as follows: “The grand avenue of Luang Prabang runs for two kilometres from the city gate to the Nam Hou river. On market days it is filled with crowds from one end to the other. Hawkers and customers come there from early morning, some in the open air, others under large umbrellas or in bamboo boats. Fishermen bring huge fish which they have kept alive in the river. Natives from the mountains, recognisable by their tattooed skins, turbans, and striped dress, arrive with baskets full of game, poultry and upland produce. Some Burmese merchants sell cloth, needles and betel boxes. A small number of Chinese sell opium, harbardiaury and gemstones.”

The market of pre-colonial days appears to be an informal meeting of both customers and vendors, conveniently taking place on the busiest road. Simple huts and pieces of cloth on the ground make up the market stall. Architectural elements serve solely as a protection from rain and sun.

In Vietnam’s present-day countryside two types of markets can be recognised: the first type is very similar to the markets described by the French explorers; it consists of a collection of small huts made of local material, located along the village’s main street (fig. 1). Large trees provide the huts with protection from the elements. The second type consists of a collection of separate stalls at the front and rear of a large hall, a configuration originating from the market’s location in comparison to local infrastructure (fig. 2). This market type traditionally appeared at a junction of tracks between villages and a body of water. Farmland products are sold at the entrance of the market, directly where the produce is offloaded. Meat and, above all, fish is sold at the rear of the market, as it is closest to the river. Inside the market solely dry goods are sold, such as clothing, toiletries and household utensils.

The impact of the region’s climate on the market layout is evident, as it is directly influenced by tropical heat and rain. The comparison of the pre-colonial and present-day examples also reveals how even though goods and behaviour have changed over time, the village market has not changed significantly. However, we do see the introduction of the large hall, which can be attributed to French intervention.

Building a France away from France – the French colonial market

With the establishment of the French Protectorate over Cambodia in 1863 a new form of architecture and urban planning was introduced to the region. Preceding French intervention, Phnom Penh was just a string of huts on the bank of the Tonlé Sap River. The Mission Civilisatrice, however, obliged France to turn the city into a true Perle d’Orient, as it was after all her responsibility to share and spread her superior civilisation. This ambition was to be accomplished by architecture and urban planning. The colonial administration started to build a colonial infrastructure with the realisation of roads, railways and public works. Covered markets were, just like city halls, prisons, post offices, police stations, schools and hospitals, part of these public works.

At first, French colonial administrations approached their Mission Civilisatrice in a manner governed by the principle of exsolation, which subjected people to an administration shaped by French values. This approach led to a large number of French public works in Beaux-Arts style, varying from prisons and military barracks to post offices and municipal theatres; all fashioned after the latest style in Île de France.

After WWI’s change in French colonial politics in Indochina appeared; assimilation was replaced by a policy of association, which gave more consideration to local culture. With this change a more context sensitive architecture surfaced, which is best described by the work of the architect Ernest Hébrard, who introduced the Style Indochinois. This style derived its detailing and decoration from indigenous architecture and adapted more easily than the Beaux-Arts styled buildings to Cambodia’s tropical climate. Local culture became not only an example from which one could learn, but also the face of important public works. However, Hébrard’s style still relied on formal principles of the Beaux-Arts tradition; his plans were often symmetrical and consisted of volumes arranged in a classical sequence. His style therefore did not differ essentially from the Beaux-Arts tradition. The Style Indochinois seems to have disappeared from the architectural stage in the early 1930s, whereupon a more abstract style arose. This style continued Hébrard’s sensitivity towards local conditions, but it banned his literal citations of indigenous motifs and his formal references towards the Beaux-Arts tradition. Plans and sections responded primarily to their urban, social or cultural context; especially to the tropical climate. One could say that this last architectural style was most successful in unifying its French and Indochinese conditions.

Cambodia’s three still-standing covered markets from the French colonial period – Psar Thom Thmei in Phnom Penh (fig. 3), Psar Neak in Battambang (fig. 4) and Psar Thmei in Kompong Cham – are from this last period and architectural style.

When assessing how French administrations shaped their colonial towns through the years we see a growing indigenous influence as well. An examination of Battambang, Cambodia’s second largest city, exemplifies this. Battambang lies on the Stung Sangker, a river originating in the Cardamom Mountains and draining into the Tonlé Sap Lake. Its shores have been inhabited by farmers and fishermen for many centuries. Preceding French rule the town consisted of a string of pagodas and huts along the banks of the river, with an open-air market at the crossing of dirt tracks on the western bank. However, a plan for its expansion was drawn immediately after the arrival of the French in 1907; it was a radical change from the spontaneous growth the town had previously experienced. The plan consisted of a network of roads and blocks of houses standing parallel to the river, with the open-air market at its centre. In 1926, while the railway between Battambang and Phnom Penh was constructed, a second urban plan was made. The 1907 grid was extended towards the west and a number of diagonal streets were introduced, in an attempt to give the colonial town a more imposing and Parisian metropolitan look. The diagonal boulevards converged at the original open-air market, which was formalised by a covered market in 1937. The building was clearly a French conception; it was styled after the latest Parisian fashion – Art Déco – and built from iron con- crete, a material European architects extensively experimented with at that time. But, simultaneously, the design responded quite cleverly to its local setting and its tropical environment. It allowed the indigenous market to continue at its original location and a constant stream of fresh air that flowed through the plinth and the many roof openings resulted in a surprisingly pleasant interior climate. Colonial purposes were gracefully served by its erection; the market’s hygiene was improved for the benefit of the indigenous, whilst taxes were collected more easily for the benefit of the colonisers.

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Battered Beauties: a study of French colonial markets in Cambodia

The Study

The Newsletter | No.59 | Spring 2012

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5: West-East cross-section

Psar Thom Thmei (source: author’s drawing).
them as a symbol of the modernisation of the country.3

To focus on the construction of high, new buildings, regarding from these stalls. So, the future use of the market has been structure, can no longer be enjoyed. Furthermore, goods with of how to balance aesthetics, preservation and functionality. Nonetheless, the renovation also reveals the delicate question have been constructed, replacing the rickety self-built stalls execution is often jeopardised by economic and political interests. One might say that a third-world country has the right to earn its money as quickly as possible, but as these developments have been done for Cambodian companies, the average in land speculation and demolition, which still continues today. Heritage is especially vulnerable as it is often located at primary wealth corrupted Phnom Penh’s real-estate prices, resulting in the centre, colonial purposes were never abandoned; but even though indigenous influences were more welcomed in Battambang, the preservation for Cambodians; it’s the grandest and most special Psar. The original structure consists of a 26 meter high dome from which the time, built with the simple objective to make money, but as these developments in Battambang. The involvement of the municipality has proven to be the key to success, as they have the authority to implement the Future Land Use Plan for 2020 for Battambang city and district. Centrally located in this plan lies the ‘Heritage Protection Area’, Battambang culture. (fig. 5) – ‘Big New Market’ – lies in the centre of Phnom Penh and Battambang. The many grills in the dome and the open plinth provide a stream of fresh air. It results in a surprisingly moderate temperature. Daylight is naturally filtered by the grills, casting an ever-changing pattern of shadows on the adjacent walls. Below the large cupola stands a slender column supporting four clocks. Nearest to the column stand shops selling luxury items: watches, gemstones and jewellery. This area is quiet and spacious; vendors leisurely await their customers. In the wings of non-perishable luxurious items are sold: electrical appliances, ready-made clothes, fabrics and tailored clothes. Fresh produce has moved out of the original structure into new large halls, placed at the rear of the original market. The new structures house, in addition to fresh produce, other day-to-day items: shoes, groceries, toiletries, household utensils, clothing and the more ordinary electrical appliances. Temperatures are much less pleasant in these new pavilions than in the original structure; they can rise up to 35°C, forcing vendors to lie lethargically before well-placed fans, waiting for the intense heat to pass. At primary-commercial locations, such as the hall entrances, stalls sell handicrafts and souvenirs. As food is an important part of Cambodian life, snacks and drinks are sold at every location. And equal to the large number of food stalls, the multitude of shrines; the smell of incense is omnipresent. Psar Noth (fig. 6) – ‘Meeting Market’ – lies in the centre of the French quarter of Battambang and was built in 1937. The market consists of two separate buildings, similar southern climate. The smaller building lies on the Sangker River and contains the main entrance, marked by a clock tower. In practice, however, the entrance that is most commonly used lies at the rear of the market. It is the most active area of the market as it is where the fresh produce is sold: from baskets, buckets, pieces of cloth, banana leaves, and so forth. Vendors sit on stools or squat on the ground for hours at a time. Pieces of cloth and umbrellas provide shade, and the wooden benches – finished with what used to be white tiles – fresh produce is sold for a slightly higher price. Inside the market only non-perishable articles are sold: tinned food, staple food, toiletries, clothing, stationary, shoes, jewellery. There are even hair and nail salons, equipped with Hollywood-style lights to provide for both light and some glamour. One would expect a moderate temperature inside the market, as hot air can move out of the roof structure easily. The many stalls, however, seem to block the air current, resulting in a hot and dense interior climate. In the street that separates the two buildings restaurants, which are not much more than a food corner and some plastic furniture, make food to order. At the foot of the clock tower a small shrine awakes vendor’s prayers.

There are many similarities between the two markets. First of all, they are busy as ever. They date from the same period, are made from the same material and share an architectural language. Both markets reveal the difficulties of maintaining the original ventilation system when the market exceeds its original structure. The allocation of goods is similar at both markets; outside at the rear of the original structure is the fresh produce, inside at the front of the market. The market is slightly more up-market than the market of Battambang, but in essence both markets cater day-to-day articles to the average Cambodian.

Conclusion

What relevance does architectural heritage have for Cambodia, a country struggling with malnutrition, insufficient health care and inadequate schooling? The answer is obvious and simple: built heritage is a testimony of history and gives a city its identity. Markets reflect Cambodian culture particularly well, as they have been the focal point of society for years and years. So yes, there are clear reasons to preserve the covered markets of Cambodia.

But what has specifically defined the architecture of these markets; what essentially needs to be preserved? To understand the architecture of Cambodia’s markets, one has to understand the influence of its tropical climate. Both the pre-colonial and colonial markets reveal its dominance; their architecture would be significantly different were there no torrential rains or stifling temperatures. French colonial rule obviously influenced Cambodia’s markets, by formalising the pre-colonial open-air markets with large, concrete halls – a substantial difference from the original makeshift market stalls. They moved the markets away from the river and placed them in the centres of their colonial towns. They combined them with their architectural ideas. But the French did not have a significant influence upon the functioning of the markets; fresh produce is still sold outside and dry inside. Outdoor stalls are still the same as those of the pre-colonial market. Even modern devices such as air-conditioning and refrigeration have made no significant difference. This shows that, in fact, the indigenous market, as an open-air meeting of vendors and customers at an intersection of streets, is what shaped the markets of today. And it is precisely this odd yet tremendously successful mixture of colonial beliefs and indigenous resilience that makes these markets so unique; that is what should be preserved.

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