

NEW KHMER ARCHITECTURE

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Words
by Adeena Mey
Images
by Adeena Mey
and Kiang H. Hei

Adeena Mey is a Swiss-Cambodian art critic. He is a researcher on the projects *Exhibited Cinema* (<http://www.cinemaexpose.ch/>), conducted at ECAL/University of Art and Design, Lausanne, and *Swiss Film Experiments*, based at ZHdK/Zurich University of the Arts and Lausanne University. His recent publications

include a co-edited volume of the film studies journal *Décadrages on expanded cinema* (with François Bovier) and the essay "Rancière as Foucauldian?" in *Foucault, Biopolitics and Governmentality* (Jakob Nilsson & Sven-Olov Wallenstein eds.).



All cities are geological. You can't take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past.¹

THE CAMBODIAN RIVIERA

This is what Kep, a little town on the Cambodian coast, was dubbed after the nation gained its independence from France, in 1953. It is also sometimes said to be the nest of Khmer architectural modernism. Indeed, many villas bearing modernist features are scattered on the hills of Kep, overlooking the Gulf of Thailand and offering a view onto some of the nearby small islands. Some belong to Cambodia, others to Vietnam. Locals insist that all of them once belonged to the former. As with these islands, the houses represent a constant

reminder of another Cambodia, of its history. Not much is left of these houses. Once serving as secondary residencies for the Phnom Penh bourgeoisie, of the few dozen still scattered throughout the area only the supporting walls and some facades remain. The landscape of ruins that they produce, and what remains of their material sovereignty and wholeness, create a kind of spectral presence of Cambodia's modernist past. Yet, surprisingly, one ensemble of constructions seems to have been spared by the Khmer Rouge and by time: Prince Norodom Sihanouk's residency.

...historical events are registered in material organization. Therefore we might be able to glean from a forensic investigation of material spaces and traces the history that produced them, that is folded into them. The question is: How are histories inscribed in spatial products?²

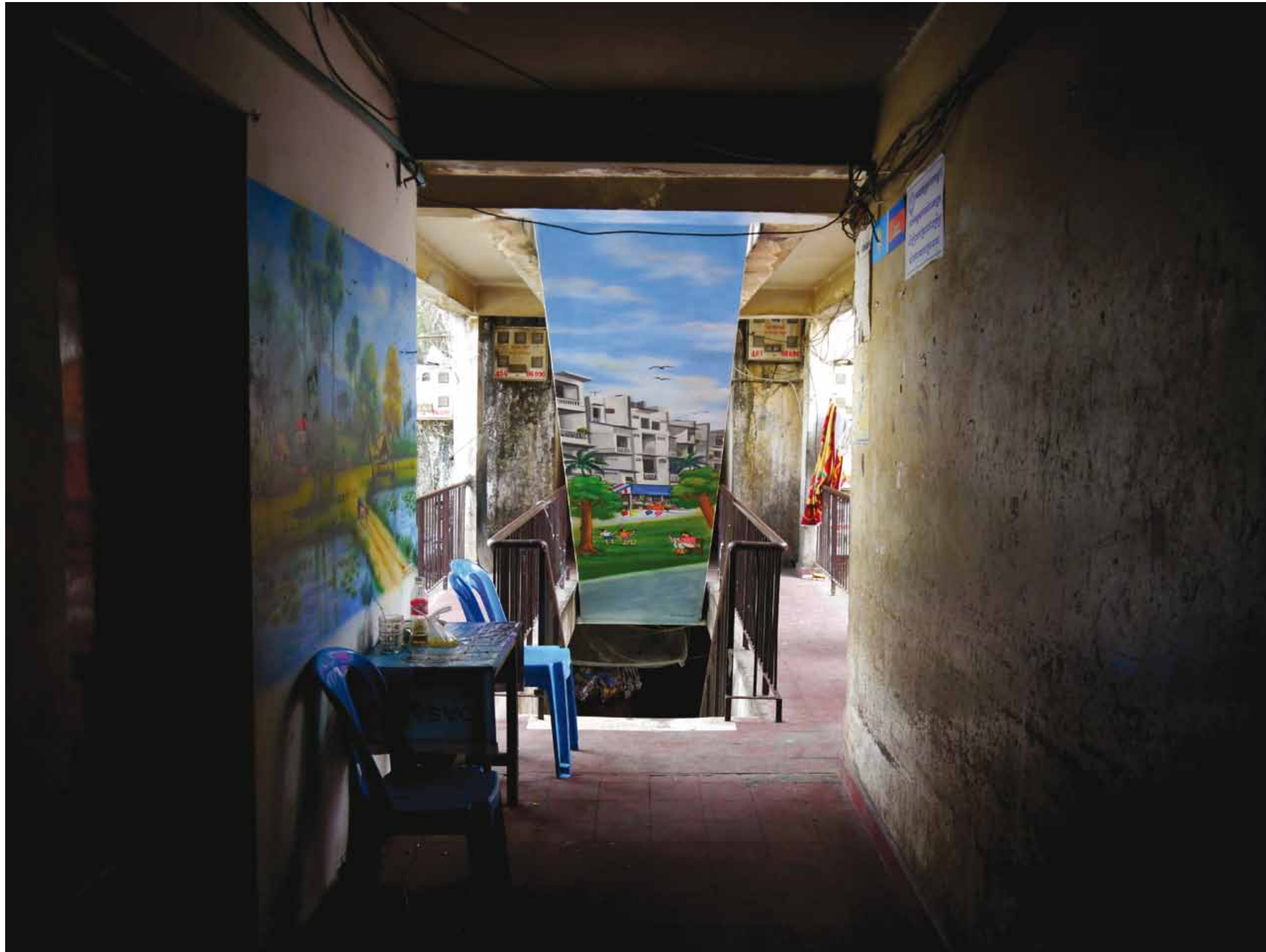


“POLITICAL PLASTIC” OF THE SANGKUM

The Sangkum Reastr Niyum (“Popular Socialist Community”) was a political organization founded by Norodom Sihanouk, based on and promoting a doctrine called “Buddhist Socialism.” Literally, a socialism based on Buddhist principles. The emergence of modern architecture in the Kingdom of Cambodia in the 1960s is correlated with the foundation of the Sangkum, a movement whose most salient figures and productions have been subsumed under the label New Khmer Architecture. The latter can be read as “New Khmer – Architecture” or as “New – Khmer Architecture.” Through built environment and urbanism, New Khmer Architecture fulfilled two goals. First, it created an architecture that was modern and that broke with French colonial style, while also keeping features that properly characterize Cambodian buildings – from the temples of Angkor Wat to the traditional, rural wooden houses, built on stilts

and designed to allow air in – in line with the will to modernize every sector of Cambodian life. Hence, secondly, it was also the architecture of what was seen as the start of a new era for Cambodia: post-colonial and modern, international and Khmer. We can speak of New Khmer Architecture in terms of “Political Plastic” – in Eyal Weizman’s definition – as it encompassed both the built environment and urban planning initiated under Sihanouk, and the political engineering known as the Sangkum. The latter unfolded through the materialities and spaces designed by Vann Molyvann, Lu Ban Hap, Chhim Sun Fong, but also Vladimir Bodiansky and Leroy & Mondet.

Architecture can only be sustained today as a critical practice if it assumes an arrière-garde position (...). It is my contention that only an arrière-garde has the capacity to cultivate a resistant, identity-giving culture while at the same time having discreet recourse to universal technique.³



VILLE RADIEUSE, PAYS RADIEUX

New Khmer Architecture is widely associated with the sole name of Vann Molyvann. After having studied at the Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris on a “Royal Cambodian Government” scholarship, upon his return to Phnom Penh in 1956 Vann Molyvann was appointed head of Public Works by Sihanouk. As the first Cambodian with proper training in architecture, he became architect of the State.

In writings and interviews, Vann Molyvann frequently cites Le Corbusier as his most important influence. His *Front du Bassac* project of urban development explicitly attempted to implement his master’s principles of “ville radieuse.” In accordance with his attempt to found anew the idea of “Cambodianness” in architecture and to articulate the Universalist pretensions of modernism through this re-actualized genre of regionalism, sober concrete structures began to sprawl across the essentially rural landscape of the nation. On some of them, shapes replicated the form of pagodas in order to state that the buildings were Khmer.

National Theatre
 National Sports Complex
 Olympic Village Housing
 SKD Brewery
 Teachers Training College Institute of Technology
 Institute of Foreign Languages
 Royal University of Phnom Penh
 Sihanoukville Station
 Independence Monument

(...) the abstract nature of the architectural object has been dematerialized through the multiplicity of its allusions to the past.⁴



photo by Anne-Charlotte Maltherre Barthes



GOLDEN SIXTIES

For many people in Cambodia, the 1960s and the Sangkum period represent the country's golden age. Not only did modern architectural practice develop in this period, but all of the arts were, in addition, on the path toward hybridizing Western influences, while remaining distinctively Khmer. Cambodian Cinema (*Kon Khmer*); a form of rock music imbued with psychedelic tones; and stammering attempts at modernizing painting and sculpture, defined what two researchers have called "Cultures of Independence." Cambodia even took part in the first Paris Biennale in 1959, the painter Men Makoth incarnating the artist-author, breaking from the traditional image of the craftsman.

Since the 1990s, ten years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, post-conflict, peace-building, humanitarian and international-legal imperatives have

been redefining a traumatized landscape. The UN and NGOs. The Golden Sixties and the Sangkum are inscribed within a linear history and its teleological narrative. Accordingly, Cambodian history is roughly divided into three periods: ante-conflict, conflict, post-conflict. Pre-1970 Cambodia is characterized by a "peaceful lifestyle, easy social interaction and a place where violence is a rare occurrence"; the Khmer Rouge Regime: "These years of turmoil have badly damaged the fabric of Cambodian society and gradually eroded its traditional foundations. Everything was turned upside down"; 1979-1989, a period of recovery from the devastation of earlier years; from the UNTAC period until today: "The opening of Cambodia to a market economy as well as to outside forces."

*(...) expansion of physical surroundings, sensibilities, media, through disturbance of the familiar. Action is architecture! Everything is architecture!*⁵





CAMBODIA, FROM THE FUTURE

In the emerging Cambodian cultural scene, there is a 1960s retro trend, not to mention a nostalgia for this recent but almost extirpated past. The productions of the New Khmer Architects stand as physical witnesses to this “golden age.” They attest to an “authentic” Khmer identity, against the fast rise of Asian turbo-capitalism and its glass towers. *Remember, save, patrimonialize.* But beyond nostalgia or reaction, and indifference, can what is left of the New Khmer Architecture be re-invested with any sense of futurity?

notes

1. Gilles Ivain [Ivan Chitchevlov], *Formulary for a New Urbanism*, Situationist International, No. 1, October 1953.
2. Eyal Weizman, “*Political Plastic* (Interview)”, *Collapse*. Philosophical Research and Development, Vol. VI, 2010.
3. Kenneth Frampton, *Towards A Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*, in Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture*, 1983.
4. Peter Eisenman, *Graves of Modernism, Eisenman Inside Out. Selected Writings 1963–1988*, 2004.
5. Wolf Vostell and Dick Higgins, *Fantastic Architecture*, 1969.