

Cambodian Modern: Vann Molyvann and the New Khmer Architecture

- *Throughout time, the built environment has persisted as one of the most profoundly important reflections of culture. Architecture helps to reveal who matters in a complex and plural society. It is the setting through which we express ideals like democracy, or freedom, or other kinds of national values.*
- *Architecture is an instrument of emancipation and an apparatus of social change, intimately intertwined with its social, political, and economic contexts and major events in world and/or national history.*

The East-West Center, in partnership with The Vann Molyvann Project, is developing an international traveling exhibition, book, and a series of public programs on the New Khmer Architecture of post-colonial Cambodia under King Norodom Sihanouk. It is a story of independence after a century of French colonization, creating a new national identity through the built environment, and a contemporary look at architectural and cultural heritage preservation and its importance to urban sustainability and resilience.

The iconic architecture of Vann Molyvann and his contemporaries, which will figure prominently in the exhibition, has never before been shown outside of Cambodia. It is hoped that the exhibition will increase awareness and raise the global profile of the New Khmer Architecture in support of ongoing documentation activities and efforts to present this important heritage.

Overview

Standing alongside Phnom Penh's Buddhist temples, Chinese shop houses, French colonial villas, and mega malls is a startling and remarkable group of modernist structures built during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum ("community of the people") era of the 1950s and 1960s to mark Cambodian independence.

These buildings are the only physical reminders left of an extraordinary burst of creativity and innovation that infused Cambodia during a brief but euphoric period in its modern history (1955 – 1970) between post-colonial independence and decades of political chaos. The buildings reflect the intentions, assumptions, and dreams of those who built or lived or worked in them. They have stories to tell about what Cambodia was and how it became what it is. They connect generations of Cambodians to their recent past, serve their needs in the present, and offer visions for the future. In doing so, the buildings provide powerful examples of how the built environment – with its varieties of identities and memories – can help them understand who they are.

Known as the New Khmer Architecture, these iconic buildings were designed by Vann Molyvann, a young Cambodian architect who studied under Le Corbusier at L'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris, and a small group of his contemporaries. Together they formed a new architecture that reinterpreted the international style of the day by merging aesthetics and materials of postwar European modernism with two unique and distinctly Cambodian values rooted in Khmer history, culture, and environment: the grand tradition of ancient Angkor and ordinary people's wooden houses. The new style also adapted a modern vocabulary and response to Cambodia's distinct tropical climate and geography issues, with early examples of innovative and sustainable "green" design.

Today, the New Khmer Architecture and the work of Vann Molyvann is increasingly being recognized by global communities of architects, architectural historians, and cultural heritage scholars as one of the most important collections of regionally inflected modernist architecture of the 20th century. The work remains little known, understood or appreciated, however, in Cambodia or elsewhere around the world. Vann Molyvann, for all of his achievements and status as the finest modern architect to emerge from Southeast Asia, is virtually unheard of in his own country and his name barely known overseas.

Background

The post-independence period in Cambodia coincided with the global spread of modernism and forward-thinking building design. Cambodia, along with many young nations in Southeast Asia and Africa especially, turned to architecture and the built environment to explore and assert their new national identities as emerging, modern states.

After Cambodia gained independence from France in 1953, King Norodom Sihanouk launched a massive infrastructure development and building program to modernize the country, appointing Vann Molyvann State Architect and head of Public Works to help him "build the new Cambodia." Over a brief span of just 15 years (1955-1970), Vann Molyvann spearheaded the design and construction of more than 100 buildings to showcase Cambodia's transformation from an agrarian society into a modern nation: government offices, factories and commercial structures, schools, universities, a sports complex, exhibition and conference halls, cinemas and a national theater, airports and train stations, social housing projects, royal residences, and national monuments. All of these buildings are prime examples of the New Khmer Architecture.

During this period, the capital city of Phnom Penh grew from a sleepy colonial backwater into a modern Asian metropolis, known as the "Pearl of Asia." The city's area doubled in size and its population grew from 400,000 in 1962 to more than one million in 1970. The New Khmer Architecture expressed the spirit of the time and literally embodied other facets of creative cultural achievements in the post-independence era: the buildings were the backdrop to many films made by Cambodia's burgeoning cinema industry following 1960, Khmer rock'n'roll music echoed in their airy spaces, their walls were adorned by a new style of painting, and their inhabitants wore new fashions combining European and local designs.

Cambodia's "golden age" of prosperity and cultural vibrancy came to an abrupt end in 1970 when Sihanouk was overthrown in a military coup d'etat. Two decades of political chaos followed, including civil war, the murderous Khmer Rouge regime, U.S. carpet bombings, and Vietnamese occupation. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that the country began to recover in any significant way. Vann Molyvann fled to Switzerland in 1971 and did not return to Cambodia until 1991 to serve as Minister of Culture, Fine Arts and Town/Country Planning. Today at age 90, he lives quietly in Siem Reap.

While most of the New Khmer Architecture style buildings survived the years of turmoil and neglect, they are today endangered by decay and development, with many under imminent threat of demolition due to rapid urbanization, rampant unregulated development, and impacts of regional and worldwide globalization. Throughout the country, historically significant buildings are being torn down to make way for new shops and offices, as well as massive residential and commercial complexes. In 2008, two of Vann Molyvann's greatest works, the National Theatre and the Council of Ministers, were demolished. Other important structures including the celebrated National Sports Complex, considered Vann Molyvann's masterpiece, will most likely be razed in the near future (the Sports Complex is on the World Monuments Fund Watch List for 2016-2017).

Exhibition

The exhibition will feature archival and contemporary photographs, re-created architectural plans and sketches, bass wood models, and videotaped oral histories of selected buildings. It will also include archival materials such as newspaper and magazine articles, postcards, historical photographs, documentary films, and artifacts that will narrate the stories of the buildings and illuminate their past and present cultural contexts.

Note:

There are no official records of the buildings as all official drawings, photographs, models, and other materials related to design and construction were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. Vann Molyvann was only able to send a small number of original photographs of the buildings to Switzerland before fleeing

Cambodia in 1971. He has shared digital files of his collection with The Vann Molyvann Project and has granted permission to develop copies of these archival photographs for presentation in the exhibition.

Since 2009, The Vann Molyvann Project has documented a number of Vann Molyvann's buildings, conducting surveys, producing measured drawings in AutoCAD, and compiling a PDF-based archive of finished drawings. All of the drawings have been reviewed by Vann Molyvann for accuracy. The Project has also created technically accurate, beautiful basswood models of some of his most iconic buildings, collected contemporary photographs, and produced a series of oral histories. All these materials are available for the exhibition.

The exhibition will:

- Increase awareness and raise the global profile of Vann Molyvann and the New Khmer Architecture in support of ongoing documentation activities and efforts to preserve this important heritage.
- Show how the design and aesthetics of the New Khmer Architecture reflected the historical political and social contexts of the decolonization process by blending the modernist movement and ancient Angkorian elements to reflect the history and tradition of Cambodian architecture in a strikingly modern and outward-looking way.
- Reveal Cambodia's extraordinary but brief history of post-colonial/post-independence nation building and the massive social, economic and political shifts and challenges undertaken by the government to create a wider cultural expression of national identity founded on distinctly Cambodian values and qualities in art and culture.
- Explore the contemporary significance of the New Khmer Architecture as the embodiment of Cambodia's post-independence aspirations and importance to present-day perceptions of national identity and cultural inheritance.
- Place the work within current contexts of globalization and rapid urbanization impacts on post-independence/post-colonial cities across Southeast Asia and examine issues related to cultural heritage and sustainable urban development and preservation of urban architectural heritage as historical reference points, cultural anchors, and counterweights to the global culture.

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