

# The politics of the possible: Making urban life in Phnom Penh

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Phnom Penh, 're-entering' urban history as it did just some three decades ago becomes an important arena in which to focus on the intensifying contestation of rights, practices and development trajectories related to city making. Far from being comprehensively marginalized by emerging urban economies, residents with limited economic means, through their configurations of space, social relations and infrastructure continuously attempt to construct the conditions that enable the city to act as a flexible resource for the viable organization of their everyday lives. These issues are taken up in an analysis of some of the ways in which residents of a large low income housing tract, popularly dubbed 'Building', in the Bassac River neighbourhood collaborate to maximize their access to resources and opportunity.

**Keywords:** Asian urbanization, city development, livelihood formation, political practice, spatial organization, urban culture

## Introduction: shifting terrains for the productivity of urban life

Although sometimes seemingly broken, cities remain critical domains for engendering new collectivities which, in turn, continuously remake the potentialities of life. Yet, prevailing notions of inclusion, capacity building and sustainability often either intentionally or inadvertently close down spaces of operation. This paper details some facets of the work to make the most out of urban life undertaken by mostly poor residents in the dense housing settlement simply called 'Building', as this iconic part of the well-known 1960s riverfront precinct in the Tonle Bassac (Bassac River) neighbourhood of central Phnom Penh has become known.

Across the world, various urban social movements and civic and municipal institutions have been working to substantiate the presence of the poor within the more central domains of cities by emphasizing their right to the city. In other words, everyone who lives in the city is legally entitled to make a life that counts. No matter how the city is changing, or what makes economic sense at the time, or even how unviable the contributions of the poor may seem, the right to the city is to be something that has no qualification. Activating this right requires repeated efforts to keep the poor 'in place' against the grain of inflationary land values, transformations of land use or locational shifts of employment and production. Thus municipalities have adopted various formulas to make the presence of the poor workable – such as subsidized land purchases or long-term leasing arrangements, land sharing schemes that attempt to forge a compromise between generating maximal profit on valuable land and minimizing the political costs of displacing long-term residents, land swaps and the dispersal of large low income communities in small clusters throughout the city (Evans, 2001; Pizzaro *et al.*, 2003; United Nations Program on Human Settlements, 2003).

Regardless of whether or how these formulas are applied to specific urban contexts, their underlying assumption is that low income residents lack the capacity to give shape to the urban system beyond an efficacy related to their own limited survival needs (Cheng & Gereffi, 1994; Meagher, 1995; 2003; Carr & Chen, 2002; Roy & AlSayyad,

2004). The prevailing orthodoxy in planning, research, and administrative institutions holds that property rights and security of tenure constitute the necessary basis for the accumulation of resources needed to make urban life viable for low income residents. However, much remains yet to be explored about how the activities of the poor substantially constitute the city itself (Goldman & Weitzman, 1997; Robinson, 2002; Chatterjee, 2002; King 2003; Smith, 2005). The now historic groundbreaking studies of John Turner (1976), Lisa Peattie (1972) and Janice Perlman (1976) can be complemented with further analyses that consider emergent ways in which collective actions coalesce and mutate in light of new urban developments.

Most instances of self-provisioning of essential urban services and compensations for limited income generating opportunities may be labour intensive and not cost effective. However, what are often obscured are the continuous reshaping of many low income localities and the particular capacities of the poor for driving and adapting to new modalities of urban existence (Bayat, 1997; Benjamin, 2000; Koolhaas, 2000; Bakker 2003; Chakravorty, 2003). The compositions, histories, spatial characteristics, economic complexions and political contingencies of poor communities in the global south are inundated with their own particularities, sensibilities and potentials. Yet these communities often demonstrate an implicit collective efficacy to sustain the vitality from which any city must continuously draw in order to make productive use of its available natural, technical, productive and symbolic resources. In other words, the institutions, sectors and heterogeneous groups making up cities must continuously rework how people, things, infrastructures, languages and images are to be intersected and pieced together. Self-conscious planning may indeed at times be capable of providing representations of this work. But for the most part, this dynamism comes from maximizing the potentials within the city itself for relations among all kinds of things for which there exist no prior maps, inclinations, or even apparent possibilities (Law, 2002; Jiménez, 2003; Ferrándiz 2004; Narula, 2004).

There exist alternative ways whereby subjects, objects and spaces interact regardless of the specific histories of cities (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Mackenzie, 2002). It is through this process of differentiating and divergence that elements of the city are taken beyond their 'old neighbourhoods' and placed in new circuits of interaction (Shields, 2003; Massey, 2005). Modern cities have always taken the energies, experiments and styles of their different human inhabitants and 'contracted' them, both in the sense of truncating these practices and establishing contractual relationships defining the rights and responsibilities of urban citizens (Pamuk, 2000; Rose & Osborn, 2000). This 'contraction' may provide urban actors with new opportunities for apprehending understanding and organizing themselves. Urban dwellers, in this case low income dwellers, have skills in interweaving their economic abilities, their capacities for social relations and their ways of complementing the abilities and resources of others. However, in the process of 'contraction' these skills may be reconfigured in ways that make them difficult to recognize and to be reclaimed as their own (Lomnitz, 2003; Diken, 2004; Elyachar, 2006).

Many interventions aimed at securing a long-term presence of poor households in particular sites and under specific financing arrangements do not turn out as planned. Sometimes the presence of the poor in particular areas is wiped out all together. But sometimes residents of different backgrounds and economic capacities remain – where many different kinds of social and financial arrangements are at work. And because different needs, aspirations, vocations, networks and abilities coexist, a range of markets can be opened up that bring diverse residents into more elaborate connections with each

other and whereby the locality as a whole makes more effective uses of an increasingly service rather than industrial urban economy. Thus, the mixed economies of diversified localities could potentially substantiate the capacity of cities to maximize the resourcefulness of their internal elements, as well as take advantage of the variety of transurban commercial activities that are not directly engineered by multinational corporate capital (Robinson, 2002; Sellers, 2002; Wee & Jayasuriya, 2002).

### **Bassac: divergent localities and the remaking of Phnom Penh**

In this paper I explore how one poor locality in Phnom Penh constitutes concrete possibilities for making the city work for its residents. Phnom Penh is particularly amenable to this exercise as the city combines a long-term memory of urban existence with a recent history of having to be remade from scratch after being almost totally evacuated under the Khmer Rouge regime in 1975–79. Thus the city ‘re-enters’ urban history just before the advent of the structural adjustment, trade liberalization and governance restructuring that signalled a new framework of global urban development in the early 1980s. Phnom Penh had to rapidly accommodate a population that was in essence a residue of its former self. Much of the established urban population were killed during the Khmer Rouge’s forced relocation campaigns and many who came to the city in 1979 had no prior experience of it and were there because there was simply nowhere else safe or feasible to live in Cambodia. Moreover, much of the archive and cadastral that had registered what belonged to whom was destroyed – but even if such a record had existed, there were no ready legal or administrative mechanisms to enforce particular settlements. Even now, 27 years later, secure tenure remains problematic and evictions in the face of land deals continue unabated.

Given the complications of administering a population settling wherever they could and with very limited livelihood opportunities in the years immediately following the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime by troops from neighbouring Vietnam, militarized controls were applied for the distribution of food, where people could go and what activities they could engage in. The city’s residents, though forced into some equanimity by a shared sense of the political trauma they had survived, were nevertheless a *mélange* of wildly different backgrounds thrown into close proximity and continuously having to improvise the basic tasks of collaboration (Gottesman, 2003). Infrastructure for the provision of sanitation, water and power that had stood vacant for several years had to be reworked step by step. Compounding this, in the then prevailing cold war status quo, the Vietnam-backed People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was largely shunned by the so-called non-communist world and survived primarily on assistance from the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the protracted insurgency spurred by the remnants of the Khmer Rouge had prompted continuous mobilizations of Phnom Penh’s population, which not only effectively involved residents in the remaking of the city but also led to many urban residents fleeing to escape military conscription (Martin, 1999; Frieson, 2001). While the various efforts of the PRK to organize the urban population into productive and social units (under the auspices of the Kampuchean United Front for the National Construction and Defense) were critical in restoring the city’s built environment and economy (Vickery, 1984), the decision in 1985 to provide greater latitude to the economic capacities of Cambodia’s Chinese population and their connections across a regional diaspora, proved significant to urban accumulation (Gottesman, 2003).

The withdrawal of Vietnamese troops in 1989 significantly repositioned Cambodia’s place in the world and opened the door to the implementation of the United Nations

Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC) to reintegrate Cambodia into the global economy and resolve the lingering internal civil conflict. The operations of this multi-lateral mechanism aimed at rebuilding functional governance, legal structures, economic institutions and processes, and elaborating a dynamic civil society exerted a substantial influence on the shape of Phnom Penh. Offices and residences were required to accommodate a substantial population of expatriate advisors, professionals and visitors who needed to be serviced in ways that far exceeded the capacity of the urban economy at the time. Workers of all kinds were necessary for both multilateral and emergent national organizations. Conduits for considerably heightened volumes of inflows of resources and funds had to be quickly put in place and then reconciled with the more long-term task of constructing infrastructures for trade (FitzGerald, 1994; Shatkin, 1998).

The complexity of this apparatus, the disjuncture between the availability of foreign financial inputs and levels nationally generated income, the concomitant rearrangement of labour and real estate markets, as well as mechanisms of urban management had a profound impact on Phnom Penh and accelerated its accessibility and multifaceted articulations with other cities in the region (Findlay, 1996). Despite the emphasis on rebuilding agricultural capacity and facilitating access to rural land, in-migration to Phnom Penh continued to put strains on the overburdened infrastructure and land even as the city was rapidly accessing an expanded range of external investments. These dynamics set up the basis for increased levels of contestation over the trajectories of development for the city (Hughes, 2003).

Present-day Phnom Penh is experiencing enormous change. A limited banking system that results in savings being placed in land acquisition has combined with excess liquidity derived from a substantial illicit trade economy supported by the ruling regime, with the rush of speculative investment from Korea, China, Singapore and Malaysia in particular to ensure strategic emplacement in the city, and with the easy circumvention of existing land regulation systems to produce highly inflated land values (Economic Institute of Cambodia, 2006).<sup>1</sup> From 2002 to 2005 land prices in Phnom Penh increased 30–50 per cent annually.<sup>2</sup> All the while, new developments – with names such as Happy Valley and World City – consisting primarily of multiple rows of three- to four-storey shophouses (*pteah lveng*) mushroom across the city catering to a burgeoning elite of locals and expatriates. No less rapidly, established low income localities are being erased from the city centre and those displaced communities resettled some 30 km away in sites usually lacking infrastructure and basic facilities. Over the past decade, the intensity and speed of these forced displacements have reached crisis proportions, generating almost daily coverage in the popular press and a topic of everyday conversation amongst city residents.

#### *Methodological note*

The discussion here is based on fieldwork that was undertaken in 2005–06 in the Tonle Bassac neighbourhood with five young Khmer lecturers from various higher education institutions in as part of the ongoing 'Initiating Urban Cultural Studies in Cambodia' programme.<sup>3</sup> This collaborative programme enabled onsite training in urban research for the participants, and each specialized in one particular sector of concern, including livelihood practices, spatial arrangements, religious practices and youth dynamics. An initial step in the research was to go door to door in the long housing development known as Building which is a major feature of the neighbourhood landscape (Figure 1). The objective here was to attain a basic base profile of who lived there – their period of



Figure 1. *Building – or architect Vann Molyvann’s White Building – in the Tonle Bassac neighbourhood in central Phnom Penh, Cambodia, April 2005 (photo courtesy of Penny Edwards).*

residence, occupation and place of origin. Although such basic information was attained for only about 40 per cent of the total residential units, it could be deemed sufficient for a working grasp of the demographic profile of the study area. Subsequent to this initial canvassing, in depth interviews were conducted with almost one hundred residents, supplemented by small group discussions within the main specific residential sections of Building. These sessions also included representatives of the Urban Sector Group and Urban Poor Development Fund – local urban activist organizations that over the years had been working with various community groupings within Bassac. In addition to the interviews and small group discussions, the spatial economy was mapped out in terms of assessing the distribution of varying constellations of residents and their commercial, social and leisure activities across different time sequences. The objective here was to put together a working sense of what kinds of residents were involved in specific activities in specific spatial locations across varied periods of time.

#### *Bassac and Building*

The Tonle Bassac neighbourhood sits on some of the highest valued real estate in Phnom Penh. From the mid-1970s the low income population in Bassac had been distributed over three contiguous and varying formations – Building, Dey Krahom and Sambok Chap. Building, or the celebrated architect Vann Molyvann’s ‘White Building’, was built in the 1960s to accommodate some 350 households in a linear four-storied construction, running 325 m uninterrupted. Immediately to the east of Building (Figure 2) was Dey Krahom (literally, red soil), a settlement of 1465 households spread over 4.7 ha of state public land, where the original residents were issued ‘family books’ that registered their right of occupancy and ownership of built edifices, and therefore their right to compensation if the state changed the status of the land. Sambok Chap (Sparrow’s Nest), located further to the east along the Bassac River was an informal settlement of 2890 households, where only 50 households, in an area called Group 45, possessed any formally acknowledged legal rights to occupancy. Although the settlement had been cleared out several times under the auspices of municipal beautification and redevelopment schemes, and two major fires (likely cases of arson) had forced resettlement to peripheral areas, large numbers of the original residents kept returning to the area together with new squatters.



Figure 2. *The surrounding Bassac precinct immediately east of Building, looking out onto the contiguous Dey Krahom settlement and, just beyond, Vann Molyvann's Grey Building, now a mega office complex, April 2005 (photo courtesy of Eva Sutton).*

These three Tonle Bassac sublocalities are set within an area characterized by land speculation and redevelopment over the past half century – dynamics that have accelerated during the past five years. In 2005, the state public land occupied by Dey Krahom was sold to a private developer after being reclassified. In mid-2006, when steps were taken to forcefully remove the residents of Sambok Chap, after this land too was sold to a private developer, not a few resisted and confrontations with the police frequently turned violent. Given the reluctance of many in the police to battle with residents and the widespread attention this eviction elicited in Phnom Penh and beyond, the momentum toward widescale removals slowed somewhat. Moreover, even though removals were supposedly delayed until the bulk of residents could be accommodated in the relocation site in Andoung Thmei, some 25 km away on the outskirts of the city, it was well-publicised that thousands remained languishing there in a squalor of plastic tents.

Building, a state-sponsored development to house lower rung municipal civil servants, was conceived by architect Molyvann as part of a civic precinct (Front du Bassac) fronting the Bassac River. Built in the postindependence 'golden age' period (*Sang Kum Reas Ni Yum*) of the Sihanouk regime (1953–70), which also came to be seen as the high moment of Cambodian modernism, it was modelled after Molyvann's Grey Building,<sup>4</sup> an apartment block in the same precinct that was built to accommodate the athletes and dignitaries participating in the 1966 Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO) hosted by Cambodia (coinciding with the 5th Asian Games being held in Thailand), and subsequently used as housing primarily for civil servants. In 1992, Grey Building was sold to developers and turned into one of the largest office complexes in the city, presently housing two private universities and several UN agencies. By contrast, Building was continually reworked by residents who, over the three decades following Phnom Penh's re-entry into urban history, had transformed the lower ground spaces into a hive of little shops, markets and cafes, and the stairwells into thickly gathered public spaces (Figure 3). As the Cambodian National Theatre Company had been housed in the Preah Suramarit Theatre (known locally as the Tonle Bassac Theatre), another iconic feature of this Bassac precinct before it was destroyed by fire in 1994, at least one-third of Building's residents were once involved with the performing arts.<sup>5</sup>

Although the majority of Building's residents had migrated to Phnom Penh from various rural areas during the past decade or so, the settlement remained popularly



Figure 3. *Public space in front of a stairwell in Building, July 2005 (photo courtesy of Penny Edwards).*

segmented into three sections corresponding to the three major stairwells – the ‘police section’ at the southern stairwell that originally had housed police officers (most of whom had sold off their apartments and moved elsewhere in the city); the ‘artists section’ at the middle stairwell where most cultural workers stayed; and the ‘sex workers section’ at the northern stairwell. Out of the 160 units that we were able to establish contact with, 37 indicated some affiliation to the performing arts and 25 indicated their involvement in sex work. Given the social stigma associated with sex work, such overt self-identification suggested a large degree of consolidation of this sector within the neighbourhood. While artists and sex workers may not have constituted the majority living in the sections attributed to them, those parts of the building were seen as being predominantly defined by their presence. In part, the participation of an important subset of residents in the same livelihoods – respectively sex work and the performing arts – provides them grounds for a ready commonality that did not exist for other residents. This did not mean that the sex workers or performing artists constituted homogeneous groupings or that residents involved in other livelihoods did not have ways of associating together; rather, it points to the process whereby specific residential territories get to be known as the sphere of a particular identity. So in addition to the wide diversity of livelihood practices relied upon by residents (and typical of low-income and poor urban communities), certain symbolic economies come to the fore that have particular constraints, values and possibilities in terms of the relationship of a specific locality to the larger city. In the early 1990s, an influx of residents from the refugee camps along the Thai–Cambodian border became another important anchor of Building.

But, despite its very mixed population, Building carried negative connotations in other quarters of the city, simultaneously embodied as a failed project of ‘modernist living’ and as the dangerous contiguities of sex, art, crime, popular culture and informal commerce – in short, as the place where one can acquire nearly anything.

On the surface, Building, with its buzzing small markets, stalls, cafes, gaming parlours, computer rooms, improvised classrooms and storage places seemed unlinked to any part of the city, and certainly not to the buildings and functions in the surrounding Tonle Bassac area. These included the mega office complex of Grey Building (or Phnom Penh Centre); the new National Parliament; the yet to be fully completed Naga, a Malaysian mega casino complex; the new ministry for intergovernmental affairs; the

large grounds of the longstanding Russian embassy; the shophouse complex running parallel for nearly the entire length of Building; and the well-established middle class residential area to the west. In short, the development trajectory pursued by discrete yet interlinked projects encircling Building seemingly choked it off and accentuated its existence as an anomaly.

This was especially the case given that the land of the contiguous, Dey Krahom was already sold to private developers. Although compensations and provisional relocation plans had yet to be finalized, a coalition of community leaders was allowed by the state to enter into negotiations with five private developers and choose the arrangement that best suited their interests. This coalition has been working with the 7NG Company to work out relocation to a site just beyond the airport, where this local company has provided a pilot construction (houses and roads) and promised to facilitate employment in the area. However, even in the face of imminent resettlement and with hundreds already resettled, many in Dey Krahom who remained strongly opposed have defied strong-arm tactics for their removal, though it is not clear what such a stand-off could mean in terms of the area's duration.

### *Social complexion and space*

The Land Law of August 2001 stipulates that if a household had been living in a property since five years prior to the law's implementation and secured it in a 'peaceful' manner, they were eligible for a title to that property. Although the government has consented to such a process of systematic land registration, little of this has occurred in urban areas. In abeyance of a systematic urban titling process, owners can attain a sporadic title within a three-month period, but at a cost prohibitive for all except the well-off. This disjunction between what the law permits and what the implementing apparatus can accommodate creates a great deal of ambiguity in terms of what can be done with any parcel of land and by whom, and renders both rural and urban land markets vulnerable to extensive manipulation and distortion.

Further complicating land disposition are the bifurcated distinctions in state-held property – that is, state public land and state private land (in addition to the category 'private land'). Article 15 of the most recent land legislation stipulates that public land for general use – such as airports, roads, parks, stations, territories of natural origin (e.g. rivers), and archaeological and religious sites – cannot be sold; land that does fall into this category is state private land and can be sold. But as the state retains the right to determine when a property loses its public interest, public land can be reclassified (Khemro & Payne, 2004). Whereas a cadastral exists concerning state private land, there has yet to be a systematic mapping of state public land. And even moratoriums on alienation – such as the prime ministerial subdecree of 2003 prohibiting further sale of state land – can be circumvented through land leasing arrangements, from indefinite leases not covered by law to definitive leasing systems whose duration (up to a maximum of 15 years) is contingent upon a contribution to be made in the public interest. Although leasing systems can only be applied to areas less than 10 000 ha, this criterion is seldom adhered to. Yet additional complexities derive from a woefully underdeveloped taxation system. Whereas agricultural land can be taxed at a rate from 2–3 per cent of the value of the land annually, vacant land or land without commercial purposes is taxed on an ad hoc basis, making it appear that the state is waiving taxation on as much land as possible. The only discernible controls are in the collection of a flat tax of 4 per cent on all purchased land as the receipt is required for its registration.



An ambiguous legal context coupled with land speculation directly supported at the highest level of the regime led to anticipation that Building's days were numbered. Still the diverse backgrounds, aspirations and economic capacities of its residents preclude any easy resolution of sporadic negotiations with municipal and national authorities to explore various resettlement schemes. Building's diversity also provides sufficient 'corridors' of connectivity to the rest of the city so that the ruse of development to create a kind of structural claustrophobia, a 'choking off', can be practically countered. Among residents there is widespread ambivalence on the wisdom of remaining even if some breathing space is constantly conjured up. The transformation of the built environment across the city produce new imaginaries of what constitutes the signs of really belonging to the city and of what it means to be a 'normal' resident. Within the warren of staircases, narrow halls, cramped apartments and densely packed commercial spaces, all rubbing up against each other, the management of everyday transactions and security in Building is labour intensive. There are barely any formal agencies or associations that might lend some predictability or order, yet, disparate agendas and inclinations do manage to interlock through residents' need and ability to observe what each other does and to render this a matter of conversation, both serious and playful.

The scores of small cafes, inserted in the ground floor openings that had been initially built for flood control and ventilation, are one example of the many local domains for everyday management and the circulation of information. In those mostly frequented by youth, the social scene is usually heterogeneous in terms of who is sitting and talking together. Even though clear demarcations of self-identity are engaged through tattoos, clothing and hairstyles, or ways of speaking, these cafes are not appropriated as the hang-out of any particular group but remain as places for a kind of mutual witnessing and exchange. Thus, youth who are able to attend university or the scores of tertiary-level training programmes across the city will routinely mask where they come from in order not to be shunned; at the same time, they have access to information and points of view that youth who consider themselves *chukan* (gangsters) and who strongly assert their residential location do not have.

In the cafes then there is great emphasis on an exchange of different interpretations of the rest of the city made possible by these divergent trajectories of engagement. For the *chukan* do not sit still within Building but also attempt to figure out ways to move across the city, through a field of antagonisms and alliances with other gangs, or by doing the dirty work for syndicates (most often Vietnamese). This exposure generates stories and information that the university students then use as a resource in their zones of operation to communicate a street wisdom that not many of their fellow students possess. At a more concrete level, the cafes and youth become contexts for the advertisement and acquisition of goods and services obtained through theft, bartering, or as the by-product of favours rendered to *okhna* ('big men'). For both poor and middle class residents, who struggle to maintain specific levels of consumption, access to such low cost goods are critical. Across the area, this profusion of talk, information exchange, rumours and transactions also take places in the billiard and snooker sheds and over card games.

Building, like Dey Krahom, has been characterized by multiple comings and goings: roughly 40 per cent of the residents in both settlements have never lived anywhere else in Phnom Penh – for low income city dwellers it was crucial to hang on to a place to live at all costs, given the limited land transactions possible for few but the well-to-do. Thus, the social economy of Building continues to find an anchor centred on a wide range of informal trades and individual entrepreneurs, as well as the very identities and

particular networks of the performing arts and sex work Household composition, spatial and financial arrangements, gender economies and problem solving outlooks in the sections dominated respectively by sex workers and their associates, and performing artists are markedly different, even if each is regarded with suspicion by the wider society. Even as this divergence provides distinct zones of anchorage, the proximity of these different sections enables them to provide a range of opportunities and supports to each other.

For example, because Building's reputation as a centre of artists is well known, customers of the sex workers frequently inquire about musicians and other performers for weddings and other celebrations – occasions on which the artists depend as important sources of income. Daily workshops in classical dance, music, and theatre – organized as a way for the many senior artists living in the area to impart their knowledge and skills to a younger generation – are also made available to some of the younger sex workers as these skills can probably take them off the street and into higher-end karaoke and entertainment complexes.

The other key social constellation in the building are the *neak roap robos*, women who acquire household essentials such as MSG (monosodium glutamate, a food flavour enhancer), rice and soap powder in bulk and advance large quantities on credit to households. This way of provisioning is more economical than buying small amounts of necessities daily, the usual practice of low income households. Again, each social grouping or cluster in Building has their own practices of self-maintenance and their own obligations and reciprocities. As clusters have varied interactions with each other and with diverse residents, residents need opportunities where no particular cluster attempts to define interactions on their own terms. In other words, the sustenance of the three social groups that provide a point of reference, artists, sex workers and *neak roap robos* – each with a long-term but not necessarily stable coherence – within a complex neighbourhood of relations, cannot be based on cutting themselves off from each other as a defensive manoeuvre. Nor can anyone simply count on a sense of mutuality within their primary reference group without spending a great deal of time and energy making these bonds manifestly meaningful. The cafes, pool halls, cards games and gambling dens then become places of limited equanimity, where regardless of the person's standing or affiliations, the process of playing the game is itself a bet on the possibility of an exchange of information and points of view. Additionally, these transactions become a means of fine-tuning the frequently jumbled insertion of various activities within the crowded spaces of the area.

For example, 25-year-old phonebox owner Srey Oun, married and with a son, had worked as a waitress in Chin Chu Tea Restaurant in Khan Bang Kengkong district, not too far from Bassac. Because this entailed late hours at night, her husband encouraged her to leave work to look after her child. Her phone business generally earned less than 10 000 riel (USD 2.50) a day. But her father, an artist from the postindependence golden age period and who had lived in a Building apartment since 1979, had secured her a place next door rent-free, as long as she helps out with an occasional performance at a wedding. Her phone business set up in front of a small cafe incurs no rent, in return for helping the owner manage the place whenever his assistants do not show up. Srey Oun also has a relative on the ground floor so she can connect to a power source, charge batteries and run lights as she operates until 10 pm.

Across the settlement, sugarcane vendors set up stall in the front entrance of a residence, coconut sellers set up on the rails of a staircase, children play the *shu* game in front of a woman selling porridge and a mobile phonecard vendor might operate from

the front corner of an outdoor café. In an area where both public and commercial space become indistinguishable and where rights of access and belonging are attributed to specific histories of residence and past use, the ability of many individuals to make a livelihood depends upon delicate negotiations with others. Sometimes these negotiations require cash payment for a particular use of space, such as when an 'owner' has been able to secure a strong claim on a space; at other times, exchanges are made of favours and services rendered or a 'proprietor' allows occupancy just to make sure the space is used – either to ward off the possibility of competing claims or as an act of generosity.

Since many residents in the area participate in the same economic activities – hawking the same goods, food or phonecards – competition must be calculated not to drive others to the bottom, or diminish already very small profit margins and destabilize limited markets. Limits were placed on any questioning, say, why certain residents buy phonecards from one vendor and not others. The casual and wide ranging exchanges in gaming places permit talk about the varying tastes and inclinations of different residents, thereby generating stories about the varied consumer base of the area. These stories, in turn, enable entrepreneurs to introduce slight variations in the way they sell their goods, given that pricing structures for almost all commodities hardly vary, and to construe plausible explanations about why they attract certain customers and not others.

Even at these minimal levels, Building's heterogeneity produces an environment particularly suited to an overall service-oriented economy as Bassac is far from the industrial belts fringing the city and somewhat removed from the main commercial centres. Thus, residents forge a social economy based on plying possible interactions, between providing basic goods and services amongst themselves and for customers from the nearby state ministries, universities and offices looking for cheap items and services, as well as tending to a nocturnal clientele looking for sex while facilitating work opportunities for performing artists.

Because Bassac is full of new physical developments and because Building is continually being remade – balconies covered and opened, stairwells cleared for new businesses, ground-level sheds divided and opened up – during discussions with researchers, residents conveyed their conviction that they lived a life full of possibilities despite the many hardships. When asked about the physical structure of Building itself, many indicated that despite its many flaws it provided means and opportunities for negotiating new relationships with their neighbours, finding ways to accommodate different kinds of activities and personal situations and extending own economic and social activities to other potential associations and markets. As one mobile phonecard seller, a 30-year-old mother of three, put it, 'everything is to be negotiated' and 'because everything seems to be changing around us all the time, we get good at it'.

Instead of viewing their residential and economic situations as fixed in space, to be defended in relation to the various pressures being exerted on Bassac, residents tended to represent their histories in Building as preparing themselves for new contingencies. Whether and for how long they can hold off in face of likely demolition is perceived as something partly remaining in their hands – a sense that it will be a measure of their ability to find new ways of articulating themselves to the larger city as a collective locality, not simply as individuals.

### *Comparative speculations*

While land speculation and urban redevelopment are predominate features of urban life nearly everywhere, in Phnom Penh their intensity and volatility are overwhelm-

ing. At the beginning of 2006, the boundaries of the municipality were extended to double the city's physical area. While this marked the completion of a strategic development plan for a city that had run out of land, this alteration was undertaken largely as a bet, related to apparently disparate objectives (field interview, Chey Saphon, former governor of Phnom Penh, 27 July 2006). These included the need to officially maintain the impression that resettled communities were not being excluded from the city, the need to rationalize fragmented infrastructural grids and planning frameworks, and the 'unofficial need' to inflate the value of huge landholdings acquired by the elite at the peri-urban periphery, though given that the municipality only has authority over land transactions of less than 2000 ha, it is unclear what this expansion achieves.

The extended city boundaries fully incorporated the Chinese- and Korean-owned garment manufacturers formerly at the outskirts within the municipal ambit, again with uncertain objectives and effect. The economic viability of this only productive sector of scale in the city, which employs some 300 000 young women, is based on paying low wages (USD 60–80 per month) and, for the moment, privileged access to US markets. A large ancillary economy has grown around these factories: local residents provide dormitory style housing and the basic necessities that workers purchase on a daily basis, generating approximately USD 54 million a year in rentals alone and nearly USD 100 million in consumer sales. While foreign manufacturers are entitled to repatriate profits, they are, nevertheless, constantly subject to informal extractions by various elite groupings, as are the surrounding residential communities. The extension of municipal boundaries were seen as intended partly to rationalize the financial obligations of this sector and the surrounding communities, but the underlying motivations for the insertion of municipal responsibilities into this domain remained the subject of wild conjecture.

Because of the obvious weaknesses in urban productivity, speculative activities focus on the value of ground rents in anticipation of Phnom Penh's increasing insertion in global economic networks, thus bolstering the purchasing power of an emergent urban middle class (McGee, 1999; Pornchokchai & Perera, 2005). Part of this speculation is driven by investors' belief that they must act quickly before the most valuable sites are grabbed by others and before new regulatory regimes become inevitable. Competition among investors – from Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia and China – is rife.

Much nationally identified infrastructural investment so far has been premised on attracting a network of related nationally identified interests: Singapore hotels and office buildings will attract Singapore package tourists, and thus related services such as tourist agencies, insurance, advertising, public relations and transport, in turn taking up office space and further bringing in other speculative investors from Singapore in similar and different sectors. Hence discrete sectors and investors originating from the same country, region or city pool resources and share risks, while collectively negotiating various packages of rebates and exemptions from Cambodian authorities – working toward an economy of scale initially based on calculating the importance of simply having a presence in the city.

The point of this discussion, however, is to emphasize pervasiveness of speculation as an urban practice engaged in by all kinds of urban actors. This is certainly the case among the low-income settlements of Bassac where speculative activity is the substance of everyday socioeconomic, even spiritual life. Much of the difficulty involved in sorting out a viable solution for the resettlements or remaking of Dey Krahom, for example, had been tied to the extent to which the complexity of its local politics was based on past

speculative activity. Theoretically, as older localities were settled, family books were issued to each household for one residential property. However, the economic fortunes of different households led some to pay off large debts by selling their rights of occupancy to neighbours, who would acquire the family book for that property and rent it out to the original occupants. Alterations in family names are easily done since the entire process remains an extra-legal process (Fallavier, 1999).

When a populous locality like Dey Krahomn is to be resettled, a list is compiled of the original residents – those issued with family books – who are accorded either monetary compensation for the property or access to property in the relocation settlement. The willingness of certain households to lend money to poorer neighbours, speculating on their inability to repay, has been calculated to acquire multiple properties in the new settlement that can be sold for much greater profit than that obtained by disposing of property in the original locality.

At times, family books are sold back to the original inhabitants, shortly before the anticipated time for resettlement, at the expected value of the new settlement property, with money often loaned by the seller. As households are nominally supposed to reside in the property for which they have a book, flexible adaptations avert the impression of subtenancy. For example, more recent arrivals who were not issued a family book, and hence not eligible for either compensation or resettlement, may acquire the property (and book) of longer resident households, who due to some circumstance will not move to the predetermined relocation site, or whose anticipated compensation has to be used to pay back large outstanding debts. These households remain put in the property by paying the new owner a so-called finder's fee, usually a portion of the proceeds from whatever business they are involved in. In so doing, the two households are thus joined as 'business partners', not landlord-tenant. All of these transactions of course influence political sentiments in threatened localities, distinguishing those who actively seek engagements with developers from those who do not.

Similarly, recently arrived households may pay outright for the family book of long resident households or acquire it in return for taking one or more members of those households into long-term employment. Property rights in low income communities are sometimes either traded outright in lieu of cash payments for access to public civil service jobs, which require an unofficial payment of between USD 1000–2000, or are offered for a limited period, say two to three years, in the event that relocation occurs during that time. While security of shelter may indeed be the predominate concern, among low-income communities in Bassac it is often traded for various durations of cash payments or long-term employment, or even short-term gains. Such divergent strategic formulations constitute localities that calculate their prospects in different ways, often creating political tensions, which also become objects of speculation, when areas face major transitions.

Perhaps the most critical form of speculation centres on individual livelihood. In Bassac, most formal employment is situated in low wage service positions – e.g. as street sweepers, cleaners, gardeners, housekeepers, tea-makers and storeroom clerks for hospitals, agencies, ministries, companies or restaurants. Each job may have incremental salary increases, but there are usually limited opportunities for advancement and these are capped at a ceiling that may only double wages after 10 years of service.

Take Mom, a 47-year-old working as a cleaner with the Cintri Company. She had stopped work as a temple foodseller at Wat Unnalom after having observed a cleaning supervisor coming to check on the workers and, one day, taking the chance to ask him

for a job. In return for securing her the job, she had to pay him 20 per cent of her monthly salary as a 'fee'. After working split shifts, from 3 am to 9 am and again from 12 pm to 3 pm for 10 years, she told us:

I went from earning 80 000 riel a month to only 160 000 riel a month [USD 40]. . . . The boss in the company is very strict, if someone is absent from work a day, the pay is reduced 10 000 riel; if someone gets sick, it is reduced 5000 riel a day.

One day as Mom was working by the roadside, a friend of her friend who worked at a scavenger workshop sorting out scrap passed by and offered to introduce Mom to the foreman. Even though she had to pay another finders fee and would make exactly the same wages, she decided to change jobs, in part because it meant not having to get up as early in the morning, but also because the friend had offered her a place to stay in Dey Krahom, and Mom thought that living close to a market might bring other opportunities.

There is a great deal of lateral movement across such small salaried positions, not necessarily for better wage levels but because a new situation may bring new relations, information, prospects for yet other patrons, borrowing opportunities, and opportunities for housing or the acquisition of basic items. Work is viewed not only as the performance of a particular task in relation to a particular institution and set procedures, but also as being embedded in a larger field of interactions which may be cultivated opportunistically to mobilize resources and opportunities that have no direct connection to the job itself. In other words, formal employment is viewed not so much in terms of a provisionally secure wage – although this remains critical for household economies – but as a platform on which new positions within the city could be constructed.

Of course there were no guarantees that any instance of changing jobs would accomplish anything or work out for the better. Frequently, workers reported finding themselves in more limiting situations, with more demanding bosses and unsympathetic co-workers; or found the conditions on which assessments were made rapidly change as workers and supervisors come and go, and the economic fortunes of an enterprise fluctuate. With so many people attempting to reposition themselves by speculating on chances for better livelihoods, the overall relationship game lacks the stability necessary for confidence building and collaboration to evolve. This results in both a dependence on and skill in operating through more provisional partnerships aimed toward short-term opportunistic gains – that is, the ability to quickly intervene in a situation, often contemplating drastic manoeuvres. Thus, some might quickly change their lives and situations by piecing together sketchy 'partnerships' among disparate co-workers and affiliates in their varied networks enabling individual participants, for example, to attain new living quarters by pooling together funds to purchase the family book of an old multidwelling building or to become co-owners of a new restaurant, whereas before they were cleaners in others. But, the risks incumbent in persisting with such livelihood strategies also increase and just as many stories abound of partners and collaborators absconding with funds, of being duped with false documents or promised deliveries that never materialize.

Regardless of popular knowledge about the risks entailed in lateral movements across jobs and the intensities in which individuals engage work as a locus of opportunistic actions, most residents we canvassed about these issues simply felt that they could not stay put. Certainly stability and security are valued, especially in the light of the precarious nature of so much at the heart of Phnom Penh's politics and history over recent decades. Still, there was among our informants an ingrained sense of uncertainty

about what could happen in the city which prevented (or protected) them against becoming overly preoccupied with stability, a sense that stability itself is a matter of speculation.

### *Re-articulating the city*

In a context where people need to rely upon relationships of trust and confidence, yet also conclude that these elements are insufficient for enabling a viable urban life, how does one then assess the institutional and policy directions that could be taken to improve the chances of the poor? The issue here is not so much the focus of specific policy directives or institutional practices but concerns the orientations of the efforts through which the urban poor continuously try to remake both themselves and the city. The questions to ask should not be shaped by a tendency to formulate solutions always aimed at some more efficient integration of the poor within economies and institutional cultures that are framed and generated exterior to their actions. Where earnings are never enough, legalities often only provisional, and household and social relationships limited in terms of what opportunities they can provide, whatever livelihoods and arrangements individuals are able to piece together seem inherently insufficient.

This is not a question or challenge of sustainability, except perhaps in some macro historical perspective, but of how people exist through insufficiency – what they do with it and how they address their situation of always needing more. Therefore, much of the normative development agenda that emphasizes the mobilization and concretization of social capital, secure tenure and stable frameworks for local level participatory governance simply do not apply to what is perceived as the major challenge of urban life (Mingione, 1994; Mayer, 2003). This does not deny that secure tenure and participation are important and go a long way to making urban life more viable, but just that they tend to be offered as technical panaceas without greater appreciation of how they might concretely interact with the changing practices of adaptation and livelihood undertaken by the urban poor.

With this question in mind – of how to live through such incessant insufficiency – the assessment of what constitutes adequate housing, appropriate social densities, effective governance, and appropriately delineated work and economic specialization can simultaneously take many different directions. This consideration goes beyond any claims for the efficacy of informal economies. Instead, it deals with the shape of situations – of living space, everyday transactions, public life and work – that facilitate, even at difficult and uncertain costs, the capacities of diverse urban residents to continuously make and adapt to conditions that keep the vast heterogeneities of urban life – its things, resources, spaces, infrastructures and peoples – in multiple intersections with each other as the very basis for an urban ‘economy’ (Amin, 2002; Benjamin, 2004).

Throughout cities, architecture, infrastructure and land development are used as instruments to compel, some might say extort, new urban institutional and social relations. These include how decisions get made, what is viewed as possible or useful to do in cities, how financial responsibilities are to be defined and how risks are assessed (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Swyngedouw *et al.*, 2002). In most instances, low income, as well as many middle income residents, are pushed to the peripheries of the city. Once serviced and connected to major transportation grids, peripheral localities themselves become commodities for speculation as cheap land is acquired by those with the aspirations to build big in ways prohibited in more centralized locations. The presence of heterogeneous residents within the central areas of cities once enabled a kind of

mutual witnessing of how each implanted themselves in and operated in the city. Sometimes it enabled the elaboration of various complementarities among them. The push to the periphery, while not necessarily stopping an inflow of low income residents in their pursuit of occupations, often makes the city centre an opaque place (Davis, 2004).

In Phnom Penh, the everyday speculations of ordinary residents too introduce more uncertainty to the city. Yet at least it ensures a certain circulation of knowledge and familiarity which, while not often or even usually dependable as a stable platform on which to elaborate long-term social cooperation, recreate variable openings in the urban fabric. These openings potentially allow unmediated connections among different facets of urban life, and thus rejuvenate spaces where many different kinds of actors can be included. The so-called inclusive city is less a matter of policy and intentional integration than it is a by-product of residents having access to diverse spaces of operation through which they can come in contact with each other and do something with that contact other than participating in shared consumption. What makes the social economies of the low-income precincts in Bassac so important, even under siege, is their exemplification of how the ambivalence of urban life can be managed.

The politics of urban attainments will be increasingly 'messy'. To keep the poor in city centres will probably require engagements and appeals to a variety of disparate framings and interests. They will have to address various aspirations on the part of different factions and sectors of municipal administrations, universities, architects, artists and business people. For instance, Building's resident performing and creative artists increasingly frame and advertise their section as a site of 'creative industry'. And one local development committee offered themselves to a major developer as 'pioneer settlers' of a traditional Khmer village compound, a kind of residential theme park to be situated next to the National Parliament. Such somewhat outlandish projects complemented efforts to remake what once was a popular and affordable entertainment district in the vicinity for the many Phnom Penh families who spend their leisure time by the Bassac River. This project was a calculated strategy to get people from other parts of the city to come to Bassac, as well as make it a fulcrum of attention and resistance that would help the resident's own efforts to make it survive.

At the same time, small groups of residents are beginning to 'test the waters' for selling, buying and collaborating in other areas of the city. They do this in their spare time and by arranging for family members and friends to cover the stalls, carts and activities within Bassac. Different developers have proposed new schemes at the outskirts of the city and have outlined seemingly model communities. While not rejected out of hand, and imagined as a possible next move, there is reluctance to leave the Bassac neighbourhood. Not because it embodies any particular nostalgia or sense of belonging, but because residents recognize its actual, and even more importantly, its potential efficacy for a city where nice houses, secure tenure and straight streets, while enticing now, are viewed as having diminishing importance in the future.

Urban residency is thus valued for its potentials for putting together collaborations where individuals can hedge their bets, pursue disparate, even contradictory, aspirations, and fashion different ways both to recognize themselves and support these multiple recognitions. The city is a way of keeping things open and of materializing ways of becoming something that has not existed before, but which has been possible all along.



## Acknowledgements

As a product of a collaborative field project, the work at the core of this paper includes the contributions of Cambodian researchers Sok Ra, Chap Prem, Sok Lean, Heng Chhun Ouern, Ham Samnon, and Yin Sambo. Research for this paper was made possible by funding through the Ford Foundation grant to the Initiatives in Cultural Entrepreneurship programme at New School University, New York. The collaboration would not have been possible without the leadership, support and guidance of Penny Edwards.

## Endnotes

- 1 These general trends seem to have broad consensus among key actors involved in land market issues as reflected in interviews with the following, all conducted in Phnom Penh in October 2005: Shiva Kumar (Land Management and Administrative Project), Brett Ballard (Cambodia Development Research Institute), Ros Sokha (United Nations (UN) Development Program's Senior Municipal Program Advisor to the Municipality of Phnom Penh), Sometheareach Din (Program Officer, UN Habitat), Tuy Someth (UN Economic Commission for Asia Pacific), Chhiy Rithisen (head of the cadastral department, formerly of the Bureau of Urban Affairs, Municipality of Phnom Penh), Kim Vathanak Thida ( former Vice-Chief of Cabinet, Municipality of Phnom Penh), Sok Hok (Economic Institute of Cambodia), Brian Rohan (Asian Law Initiative, American Bar Association) and Laurent Meillan (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights).
- 2 Estimates from Cambodia Estate Agent (CEA), a clearing house of databases of land valuation (unpublished data, obtained during fieldwork, July 2006).
- 3 The project was an institutional collaboration between the Centre for Khmer Studies, Phnom Penh and the Graduate Program in International Affairs, New School University, New York.
- 4 Indeed, Grey Building, with its undulations of scale (a variable vertical distribution of floors), separations of kitchen and living area in traditional Khmer style, and living spaces raised over a vacant ground level and spaced along a series of stairwells to facilitate ventilation, was a play on the linear city formulated by Le Corbusier (under whom Molyvann had studied in Paris). It was surrounded by the contrasts of green open space and architectural homogeneity whose objective was to cultivate a form of equanimity and civic identity (Molyvann, 2003; Mingui, 2003). This construction was to embody the effort to concentrate the development of the city in a north–south line running along the Bassac River as opposed to successively concentric circles. Situated between water and open space, it was to be a foundation for responsible urban living.
- 5 While active performing artists are a distinct minority of the overall residential composition of the building, many residents have had a connection to the performing arts either in terms of having family members and kin that were once involved or presently involved or, who in their spare time, are involved in one of the several arts activities conducted, among others, by the Cambodian Living Arts initiative housed in Building.

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