

Jean-Michel Filippi



Strolling

around Phnom Penh



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Foreword

Over its history of more than 1,500 years, Cambodia has had about fifteen different capital cities. Phnom Penh was the capital for a short period in the 15th century. It again became the capital in 1865, almost two years after the establishment of the French Protectorate over the country, when at the instigation of French Navy Captain Doudart De Lagrée, King Norodom agreed to move his capital from Udong to Phnom Penh. The main reason for the move was the strategic importance of the city's location at the confluence of the Tonle Sap, Bassac and Mekong rivers, which together form the shape of an X.



The «Four Arms». Aerial photograph taken in the 1930s

In the following pages, we would like to propose an approach to Phnom Penh which is both historical and intimate. A number of strolls through the town's districts, markets, temples, and pagodas will be the way to understand Phnom Penh and a significant part of Cambodia's past. This book is not intended for the specialist. Its aim lies elsewhere. We will attempt to show Phnom Penh's past, not only its historical past, but above all, its psychological past.

Phnom Penh's psychological past appears in scattered street vestiges and in the memories and attitudes of today's residents. The relevance of this psychological past is obvious in a country where, from the establishment of the French Protectorate to the time when this text was written, in other words from 1863 to 2010, there have been no fewer than seven political regimes, each of them bringing its share of political, social and cultural upheavals, some of which are unique to Cambodia.

This book revolves around a number of strolls around the city, and it assumes that the reader will willingly play the part of a walker. The obvious advantage of the strolls is that they allow the reader to compare a

necessarily subjective book to the real Phnom Penh. This approach is not deprived of drawbacks: Phnom Penh is changing very quickly, and there consequently is a risk that the reader may not be able to identify a building, a block, or a whole district even if it is described in the book with great care. Nonetheless, this doesn't really matter because the book intends to combine past and immediate present.

At the time the book was written, the mood of the writer naturally affected the choice of the topics and the way they were dealt with. If it had been written six months earlier or later, the content of the book would have been slightly different.

This book does not intend to compete with travel guidebooks, and it has no claims to be comprehensive. We hope that the reader will not get upset when he finds no information about tourist spots such as Tuol Sleng prison or the Royal Palace.

The book owes a lot to the advice of numerous friends, the discussions I had with them, and the difficult task of proofreading. The author would like to express his deepest thanks to Stuart Alan Becker, Natalia Berman, Steven Boswell, Christiane Filippi, Ko Pxyo.

As an introduction: from the four arms to the capital of Cambodia

From history...

As concerns the pre-history of Phnom Penh, there is not much beyond educated guesses, because the city and its environs do not appear to have aroused passions for archeological research. Yet scattered vestiges, like the Chong Ek circular earthwork, prove that the area has been occupied since prehistoric times. According to Bruno Bruguier (1997): “The Phnom Penh region, far from being an archeological desert, could eventually turn out to be one of the most promising areas for a comprehensive understanding of Cambodian history.”

For historical times, one has to mention Wat Unnalom’s tower which, according to Olivier de Bernon (2001), is: “the obvious proof that the present site of Phnom Penh has been partially developed at least from the 12th or the 13th century.”



The tower of Wat Unnalom

...to myth

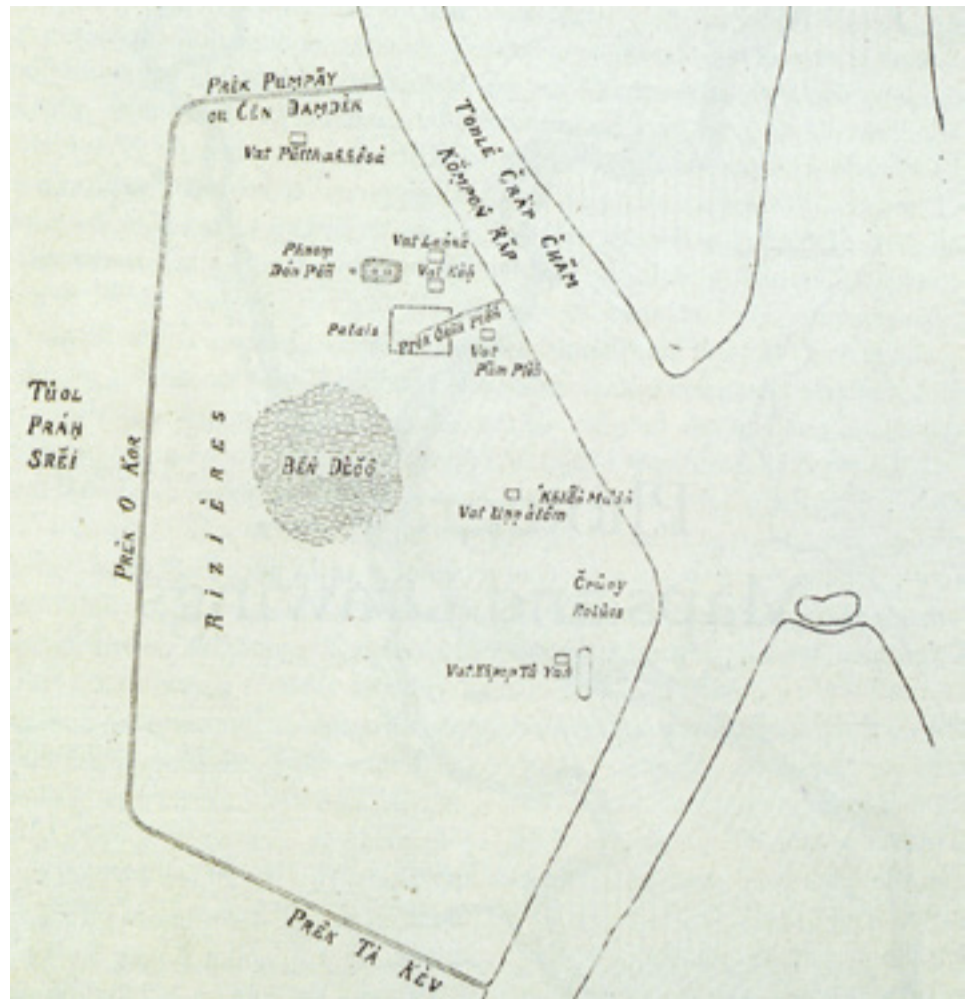
“A rich lady named Penh had her house built not far from the bank of the river, on a hillock with a cone-shaped mound at its side. One day when the river was swollen by rainwater, Daun Penh went down to the riverside and saw a big koki tree swirling in an eddy not far from the bank. She straightaway asked her neighbors to board their canoes and grab the tree. They tied ropes around the trunk and hauled the tree to shore. As Daun Penh was cleaning away the mud which coated the tree, she discovered in a hollow of the trunk four bronze statues of the Buddha and one stone statue, the latter depicting a standing deity holding a stick in one hand and a conch in the other, with his hair tied up in a chignon in the Vietnamese style. Daun Penh and the people from the neighborhood were much delighted by this find, and they ceremoniously brought the statues to Daun Penh’s house, where she built a temporary shelter to keep them. She then asked the inhabitants to come and help her raise the mound beside her house to the size of a small hill, a phnom...”

The unabridged version of this legend is in an article in French by Georges Coédés, “The foundation of Phnom Penh in the 15th century according to the Cambodian chronicles.”

The royal chronicles provide other information about the founding of Phnom Penh. However, as the royal chronicles were rather belatedly written and the chronology of the events they describe is paradoxically both precise and doubtful, there is a perpetual questioning about their historical value. The answer is very simple: since there is nothing else...

Following the storming of Angkor by the Siamese in 1431, King Ponhea Yat (1405-1467) withdrew eastward with his court and established his new capital in the area of Srey Santhor. As the new capital flooded, the king ordered construction of another palace in the area of the four rivers (Phnom Penh) and settled here in 1434, though this date, like most dates in the Cambodian chronicles, is highly hypothetical. The ceremonial name given to the capital by King Ponhea Yat was: “Krong Chaktomuk Mongkol Sakalkampucheathipadei Sereysothor Pavara Intapattaborei Rothreachsema Mohanokor,” which may be translated as: “Capital of the four arms, happy master of all Cambodia, wealthy, noble town of Indraprastha, frontier of the kingdom.” It is more conveniently shortened into Krong Chaktomuk, or “the city of the four faces.”

Guided by the royal chronicles, Georges Coédès drew a map of Phnom Penh which includes the first pagodas, such as Wat Unnalom, and the then royal palace, all situated within a triangle limited by the present buildings of the national bank, the city hall, and the central market. At that time, most of the town's buildings were on the bank of the Tonle Sap River, between Wat Phnom to the north and the present Royal Palace to the south.



Phnom Penh in the 15th century. A map designed by Georges Coédès based on the Royal Chronicles

A setback of more than three centuries

The first period that Phnom Penh played the part of capital city did not exceed thirty years. The seat of the kingship then moved out to Longvek (located between Udong and Kampong Chhnang) and then to Udong after Longvek was stormed by the Siamese in 1594.

The fact that Phnom Penh was no longer the capital of the country does not mean it ceased to exist. From the 15th century onwards, a significant change would affect the Cambodian economy: the switch from a self-sufficient economy to a commercial opening to the world. For reasons linked to its location at the intersection of four rivers, Phnom Penh from then on would play a central role in the country's economy. This new situation resulted in the arrival of a large number of foreign merchants.

What may surprise the modern Western observer is the geographic divide between political power and the economy. This is to say that the choice of the seat of the kingship obeys other criteria. Our knowledge about the Phnom Penh of that time comes from the accounts written by Portuguese and Spanish missionaries which were assembled by Bernard Philippe Groslier in his book *Angkor and Cambodia in the Sixteenth Century*. Phnom Penh then had the image of a particularly cosmopolitan town.

In 1609, according to a Portuguese adventurer's account, Phnom Penh had a population of 20,000, among them 3,000 Chinese. During this period, a new Chinese system of weights and measurements entered the Khmer language, as well as a new numerical system borrowed from the Cantonese language.

And France came

The origin, history, and achievements of the French Protectorate are prone to endless controversies, and it is not at all the intention of this book to take part in the debate.

Previously, from the end of 18th century, Cambodia had been under increasing military pressure from its Siamese and Vietnamese neighbors. The Siamese had seized the regions of Battambang and Siem Reap, and the Vietnamese had taken the area of Cochinchina.

Crowned in Udong in 1848, King Ang Duong, following the advice of the French bishop Jean Claude Miche, sent a first letter to the French Emperor Napoleon III in 1853. A second and more explicit letter was sent in 1856. Interestingly, while these letters appealed for Napoleon's help in retrieving the lost territories, they did not request the protection of France in more general terms.

In 1860, Norodom, the elder son of Ang Duong, succeeded him as king. Within three years a mechanism was put in place that would dominate the subsequent ninety years of Cambodian history: the French Protectorate.

Three facts would play a decisive part in the establishment of the French Protectorate: the arrival of French troops in Annam in 1858, followed by the fall of Saigon in 1859; the rebellion of Prince Sivotha, Norodom's half-brother, which created a situation of insecurity; and the increasingly popular idea of using the Mekong River as a way into China. In August 1863, King Norodom signed a treaty which granted France commercial benefits in return for its protection.

Phnom Penh once again becomes the capital of Cambodia

In December 1865, at Doudart de Lagrée's instigation, King Norodom accepted the relocation of the capital from Udong to Phnom Penh. By the

end of 1866, the foundation of the Royal Palace was completed.

In Milton Osborne's book about Phnom Penh (2008), one can find fascinating details about King Norodom and the building of his palace, as well as a colorful description of his relationships with the French, various personalities linked to the protectorate, and all kinds of adventurers.



One of the first photographs of the Royal Palace

What was Phnom Penh like at that time? Henri Mouhot, who visited Cambodia in 1861, described the city as “The big bazaar of Cambodia” and did not find it very interesting. We learn from him that Phnom Penh's population was about 10,000, mostly Chinese, and that many of the houses were built on the water.

An uncommonly charming description was written by the geographer Xavier Brau de Saint-Pol Lias, who had the dubious privilege of visiting Cambodia in 1885. The date is important because when he arrived in Phnom Penh, a rebellion was brewing, an uprising caused by the uncompromising attitude of the then governor of Cochinchina, Charles Thompson, who had imposed on the King the reforms the protectorate wanted to implement. Here is Xavier Brau de Saint-Pol Lias' first view of the city on the morning of February 8, 1885: “as we get nearer, we discover the red tile roofs of the houses of Phnom Penh, the flagpole of the French Protectorate, white domes or ones covered with golden paper, roofs of all shapes, the numerous and varied buildings which constitute the king's palace with its harbor, encumbered with big royal boats, which sprawls on the left part of the town. In front, a large floating building, painted in blue, is the bath of his majesty's seraglio, which must have many cabins if each of the king's wives has her own! On the right side, masonry houses look down on the river from above while, closer to the water, a long line of thatched huts sprawls below, perched on high stilts and offering a most colorful picture.” A detail incidentally reveals the small size of the town: “The 9th in the evening, the secretary of the Protectorate's representative comes with his gun in his



Navy Captain Doudart de Lagrée handing a document (the French protectorate contract?) to King Norodom I. Scene from the monument dedicated to Doudart de Lagrée near the city of Grenoble in France



Phnom Penh street in 1885



Phnom Penh in 1873

belt to the three French cafés already established in Phnom Penh to inform the Europeans they must come to the residence of the protectorate. We go to wake up Father Guesdon, who lives in a thatched hut at the end of the town, near the King's palace, on a deserted and dark road.”

Stroll I



Phnom Penh in the time of the French Protectorate

The Phnom Penh of that time can be roughly divided into three big districts with three different populations: the European district north of Wat Phnom, the Cambodian district around the Royal Palace, and the Chinese district around the market then named “Central Market” and better known today as “Psar Chas” (Old Market). To this framework, we have to add a number of small Vietnamese areas and one more important Vietnamese district called “The Catholic Village” north of the European district. This division of the population in the central part of Phnom Penh will remain almost unchanged till 1975.

The remains of the French Protectorate (1863-1953) are still numerous, and a little stroll will allow us to pinpoint a few characteristics of those eighty-eight years of the town’s history. The importance of this period proceeds from a simple consideration: out of the 144 years that Phnom Penh has been the capital of modern Cambodia, the French Protectorate regime lasted eighty-eight years.

Stroll I

Follow the guide

We’ll begin by the architectural absurdity opposite Wat Phnom between a hideous bunker and an architectural piece of nonsense which fulfills the function of a hotel. According to a more prosaic cartography, the place where streets 92 (Daun Penh Avenue) and 96, formerly Maréchal Joffre Avenue, rejoin Wat Phnom.

We then go round the hill clockwise, and once you have passed on your left a line of shops and massage parlors, you will face a wall behind which you may catch a glimpse of a concrete building. This building passes

unnoticed most of the time, which is a real pity because it is where the highest French officials lived during the time of the protectorate. After Cambodian independence in 1953, it filled the function of “governmental guest house,” where official banquets were held. The United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC) had its headquarters here in 1992 and 1993, and today the building



The building of the residence at the end of 19th century

houses the Center of Development of Cambodia (CDC). Constructed during the 1930s to replace a more modest construction, this building is in perfect accord with one of the important architectural trends of the time: a Trocadéro Square style modeled something between the Palais de Chaillot and the current Museum of Modern Art in Paris. Even though it is a government building, don't hesitate to try your luck and enter the courtyard; according to your nature, try to appear as casual or as formal as possible. Even just a glance is worth it: the unique contrast between a design which is meant to be cold and massive and the lively atmosphere of beautiful tropical vegetation. The inside of the building with its Art Nouveau and Art Deco patterns is worth a visit. Beautiful frescos from the French Protectorate and the Sangkum Reastr Niyum depict the eternal joie de vivre of the Cambodian countryside.



The new one which replaced it in 1934, today the Center for Development of Cambodia

The Post Office Square

We continue our stroll and arrive at the Post Office Square. Here, most of the buildings were designed between 1890 and 1920. Phnom Penh really began changing its appearance between 1889 and 1897, when Huyn de Verneville was the French Superior Resident in Cambodia. In his book *Phnom Penh: Then and Now*, Michel Igout shows that the population of the capital doubled from 1889 to 1897, from 25,000 inhabitants to 50,000, amongst them 16,000 Cambodians, 22,000 Chinese, 4,000 Vietnamese and 400 French.

This population increase went hand in hand with a genuine revolution in the field of town planning. A reference survey is Christiane Blancot and Aline Hettreau-Pottier's article "1863 – 1953, a new town in a formerly inhabited area" (in French) which divides the creation of the modern town into two periods. The town's structure, which still today characterizes a number of Phnom Penh districts, was planned during the first period, i.e. from 1890 to 1920.

One essential aspect was the use of legal concepts which did not exist in Cambodian customary law: "the street is an inalienable public space and private property is individual, registered and recorded in the land registry." In Cambodia, until 1884 all land belonged to the king.

The transformation of Phnom Penh into a modern capital led to some space standardization: "public buildings are positioned and organized in order to strengthen their architectural effects and their institutional character. But except for the post office square and the quays of the peripheral canal, the standardization of the streets' space is the general rule: they will all be twenty meters wide."

The building just on your left was the customs house, and on the right hand side was the former land registry office. The three-floor triangular shaped building was the police station, which has been immortalized as a hotel in the film "City of Ghosts." Just facing the police station stands the superbly restored Post Office building. The Post Office Square is in fact Street 13, referred to in the Madrolle guidebook as "Protectorate Street."

The building facing the post office is the back side of the renowned Grand Hotel, the main entrance of which was on the quays. This building, formerly better known as Hôtel Manolis, was later to become the Chamber of Commerce. This place has a local history that Henri Lamagat describes in his essential *Souvenirs of an old Indochinese Journalist*: "This business



The former land registry office, late 19th century



The customs building, late 19th century



An aerial photograph of the Post Office Square in 1929



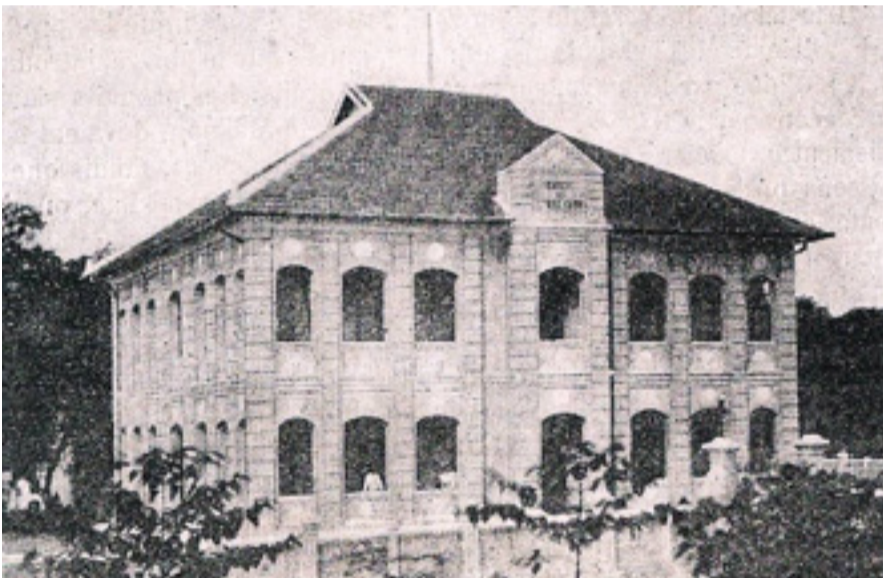
The Post Office in 1910



The Post Office in 1920



The police station in 1910



The Bank of Indochina in 1900



The former police station, current state



The facade of the Grand Hotel, early 20th century



The Grand Hotel. The back of the building, current state

belonged for ages to Demarest Company which founded it in the last decade of the 19th century. Its owner entrusted two professionals with the management and rented to them the building, the furniture, and all the hotel equipment necessary to provide for customers' needs. In spite of all that and the absence of any kind of competition, particularly in the beginning, the two managers of the Grand Hotel, originally from Burgundy... had to request the termination of their contract. In a few years, both had lost all their possessions”.

The hotel has a place of its own in literary history. On December 23, 1923, back from Siem Reap after “taking apart” the most beautiful bas-reliefs of the Banteay Srey temple, André and Clara Malraux were put under house arrest in Phnom Penh and chose to stay in the Hôtel Manolis, the best in town, where they spent four months and couldn't pay the bill. Today the place looks more and more like a squat, and nothing much remains of its former splendor. We can still catch a glimpse of it by climbing the stairs to the first floor and admiring the beautiful floor tiles.

There was something else essential to the character of the square: the restaurant La Taverne. Even if it doesn't exist anymore, it still lives in many people's mind. It is difficult to locate La Taverne with accuracy because opinions differ, and the recollections of the restaurant's dishes are stronger than those of its location. However, our enquiries were not without result: if you turn your back to the Post Office, you are opposite the Hôtel Manolis block and to its right there is another block with Artisans d'Angkor. La Taverne was in the following next block. Dining at the legendary La Taverne was a prerequisite in Phnom Penh during the time of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1955-1970). Charles Meyer, the author of « Derrière le sourire khmer » (Behind the Khmer Smile), received his guests there, the author Milton Osborne doesn't miss an opportunity to mention it with nostalgia, and Jean-Claude Pomonti evokes the herb soup with delight. La Taverne should be paid a well-deserved tribute, for instance in the form of an anthology.

La Taverne according to Milton Osborne

In everyday terms the French presence was apparent in such quintessentially Gallic establishments as the Bar Jean and the Zigzag Bar, both drinking haunts which seemed to have been transplanted, together with their customers, from Marseille. I had a particular affection for a now-vanished, traditionally-run restaurant, La Taverne, with Monsieur Mignon as its patron in the post office square. Categorizing Australians as Anglo-Saxons and so not true appreciative of the joys of food and wine, he would upbraid me for asking whether the seafood he served had been kept on ice as it journeyed up from the coast during the hottest months of the year. The taste is what matters, he would insist over again, not what happens in your stomach afterwards.

Finally, on the same side as the Post Office, at the corner of the streets 102 and 106, there is the well-restored former Banque de l'Indochine (Bank of Indochina). Though today the building is divided into an insurance company, Van's Restaurant, and the French Agency of Development (AFD), we can still notice on the iron gates the initials BIC.

The unavoidable question of aesthetics

We are now standing at the exit of the former French district. Opposite us is the former Chinese district with its Central Market known today as Psar Chas (Old Market). Even though its purpose was not to separate the two races, the De Verneville Canal used to clearly divide the two districts. The canal was filled in during the 1930s, and there are now gardens on the site between streets 106 and 108.

The buildings around Wat Phnom were originally linked to the colonial government. Most of the commentaries and descriptions devoted to the district pay particular attention to the connections between these buildings and power. The question of aesthetics is only occasionally raised, for example in Christiane Blancot and Aline Hettreau-Pottier's aforementioned article. According to the authors, turning Phnom Penh into a modern town implied a standardization of space, but they insist on the originality of the Post Office district and evoke a possible influence of the ideas of the Austrian art historian and architect Camillo Sitte (1843-1903). Camillo Sitte greatly influenced urban planning and development. In his conceptions, cultural and aesthetic aspects prevail over the pragmatic planning processes in vogue in his time, and for him what is absolutely essential is the human perception of the surrounding urban space. His various comments on the notion of "square" strongly make us think of Phnom Penh's Post Office Square, even if it is not easy to offer proof of his influence on its design.

Camillo Sitte and the post office square, from *City Planning According to Artistic Principles* (1889)

“Assuming that in any new development the cityscape must be made as splendid and pictorial as possible, if only decoratively in order to glorify the locality--such a purpose cannot be accomplished with the ruler or with our geometrically-straight street lines. In order to produce the effects of the old masters, their colors as well must form part of our palette. Sundry curves, twisted streets and irregularities would have to be included artificially in the plan; an affected artlessness, a purposeful unintentionalness. But can the accidents of history over the course of centuries be invented and constructed ex novo in the plan? Could one, then, truly and sincerely enjoy such a fabricated ingenuousness, such a studied naturalness? Certainly not the satisfaction of a spontaneous gaiety is denied to any cultural level in which building does not proceed at apparent random from day to day, but instead constructs its plans intellectually on the drawing board. This whole course of events, moreover, cannot be reversed, and consequently a large portion of the picturesque beauties we have mentioned will probably be irretrievably lost to use in contemporary planning. Modern living as well as modern building techniques no longer permit the faithful imitation of old townscapes, a fact which we cannot overlook without falling prey to barren fantasies. The exemplary creations of the old masters must remain alive with us in some other way than through slavish copying; only if we can determine in what the essentials of these creations consist, and if we can apply these meaningfully to modern conditions, will it be possible to harvest a new and flourishing crop from the apparently sterile soil”.

Stroll II



Stroll II

Around the canal

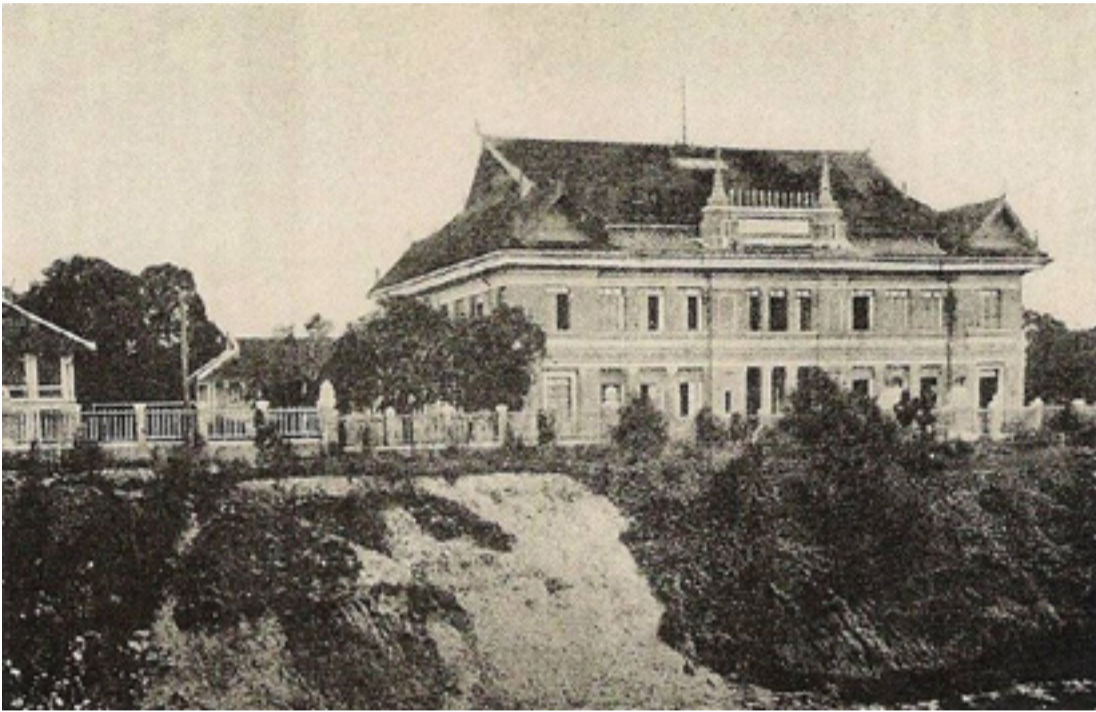
When leaving the Post Office Square, at the corner of Streets 13 and 106, you should above all avoid looking directly to your left, because the CAMINCO building (the national insurance company) is purely and simply disgusting. There may be an interest one day to study the Asian representations of modernity: as a country develops (and Asia is not without examples), people in the end renounce the flashy characteristics of modernity at all costs. We haven't reached this point in Cambodia yet and dyed glass is still very much in favor. However, to the left of the CAMINCO building, the Veisse Pharmacy is a little jewel. The original building dates back to 1910 and has been beautifully restored. The two lateral vases with snakes have been kept at the top of the building, but we can only deplore the new overly snazzy storefront. This pharmacy was mentioned in an advertisement of the 1930s: "French pharmacy of Cambodia, Doctor Adrien Veisse, first grade pharmacist, trustworthy house, 5 Quai De Verneville, strict filling of prescriptions." Why this? Were pharmacists in Cambodia not very conscientious as far as prescriptions are concerned?

The Protectorate's architectural eclecticism

Following Street 106 towards the railway station, we first see on the right, at number 19, a building painted pure white. It is the former Phnom Penh Town Hall. Adjoining this building at number 21 is the former Town Hall Residence which is today the head office of the Finance Ministry General Inspectorate. These two buildings do not display anything particular; whatever their qualities, we could well imagine them in any French town.

But the building just before the Naga Bridge is worth a detour. During the period of the protectorate, this was the Treasury, and today it is still in use as the General Treasury of the Finance Ministry. If French colonial buildings look strangely alike in Asia and Africa, there nevertheless remain here and

there a few attempts to create a style peculiar to the country. In its early stages, the protectorate created a Cambodian style, mainly thanks to the work of George Groslier (1887-1945), and the Treasury, designed by Daniel Fabré in 1892, shows the details of this architectural innovation. Heavy and deprived of embellishments, the base of the building evokes an Angkorian



The Treasury in 1897



The treasury in 1930



The treasury in 1950

temple. Buddhist pagoda details are superimposed on this structure at the level of the roof. Beginning with the National Museum, designed by George Groslier, many Phnom Penh monuments are built according to this model. The Post Office square buildings were designed in a pure French style, but the “Cambodian” style buildings in its neighborhood are in fact not less French.

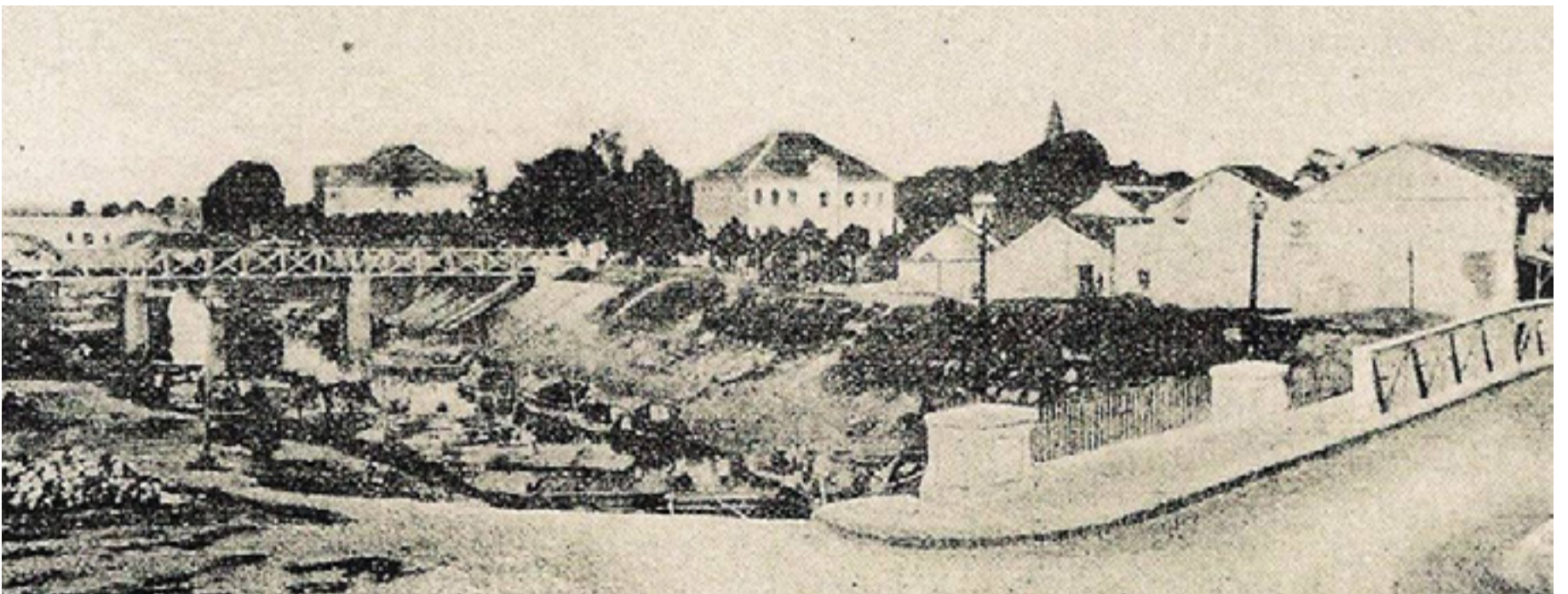
The Naga Bridge adjoining the Treasury was also dubbed Treasury Bridge. It was designed in 1892 by Daniel Fabré (1850-1904) who would in 1894-95 design the Post Office. The bridge linked the French district to the Chinese district, at that time the two sections of Doudart de Lagrée Boulevard, today’s Norodom Boulevard. The Naga Bridge crossed a watercourse, the De Verneville Canal, which was completed in 1894 and filled in between 1928 and 1935. We may think it strange to dig a canal and then fill it in a little more than thirty years later, but in fact, as we shall see, the advantages of the canal in the initial stage of the town’s development later proved to be a handicap. If we take a modern map of Phnom Penh, we can picture the canal and the de facto configuration imposed on the town. The canal started at the Tonlé Sap and stretched westward along Street 106 (then called Quai De Verneville), then turned north along today’s Monivong Boulevard (then called Miche Boulevard) before turning eastward near the north end of Rue de France (Street 47) to rejoin the Tonlé Sap close to the present site of the Chroy Changvar Bridge. The famous De Verneville Bridge – also called the Dollars Bridge – was located precisely where the canal joined the Tonlé Sap. The canal thus formed a big loop, first from east to west, then south to north, and finally west to east, entirely surrounding the European district.



Map of the canal 1889 - 1894



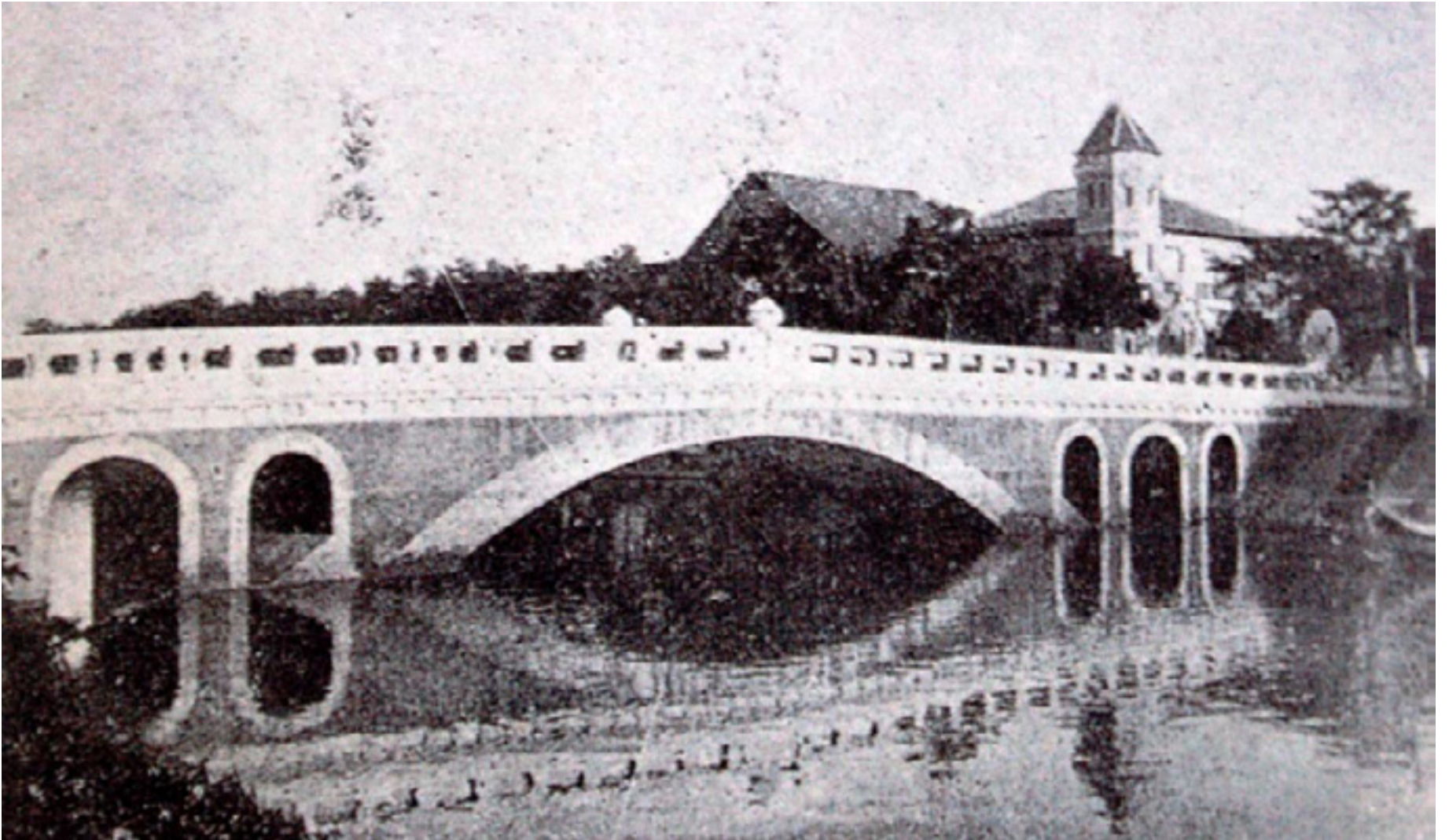
The mouth of the canal on the Tonle Sap



Ohier bridge. Currently a section of Street 13



The western part of the canal



The Treasury Bridge or Naga Bridge



De Verneville Bridge or Dollar Bridge. North of Phnom Penh, near the current Chroy Changvar Bridge

A Chinese interlude

A bridge is intended to be crossed, and thus after crossing the Naga Bridge we join Street 108 and turn right in the direction of the railway station. We are now in the Chinese district, which will be one of our later topics, but we will stop for a moment at number 75 to admire a group of three shophouses which, rather uncommonly, have written on them the year they were built, 1931. Nothing is missing: slightly kitsch embellishments, almost Corinthian columns, colonnade around the roof. In short, a beautiful French set. Well, not at all French because these are Chinese houses. A thorough study of Cambodian Chinese architecture has still to be done.

We now turn into Street 53. On the left and immediately after a women's lingerie shop bearing the suggestive name "Love House" (written also in Chinese), stands the Hainan Chinese temple. In Cambodia, the Hainan Chinese are a tiny minority who came from the island of the same name as



The Hainan Temple

early as the end of the 17th century and first settled in the region of Kampot to cultivate pepper. From the late 1920s onwards, many Hainan Chinese moved to Phnom Penh where they built the red temple you are standing in front of. The religious practices here were strictly Taoist, including Chinese gods acknowledged by the Taoist religious authorities. Just between you and me, in case you have serious problems or have read a catastrophic horoscope, don't hesitate to light incense sticks and slip a banknote of your choosing into the collection box.

Back on Street 108, we walk until we reach Street 61, known as Rue Desbos during the 1930s, and we can see the Central Market at its end. The Central Market is located on what was the boundary between the Chinese and Vietnamese districts and was built on the site of the former Lake (beng) Decho. The Vietnamese district was destroyed by fire in 1920, and a rich Chinese citizen from Cho Lon (today the Cantonese suburb of Ho Chi Minh City) then proposed to fill in the lake and build an indoor market on the site. At that time, the French authorities turned down the proposal, but they subsequently made it their own. Fifteen years later, between 1935 and 1937, the big new market, known today as the Central Market, was built on that same site.



The Central Market in 1937



The Central Market in 1940

We proceed along Street 108 without paying too much attention to the skyscraper. We are now standing in front of the Railway Station. The stupa

in the middle of the square contained relics of the Buddha which are now in Udong in the Sakyamony Stupa. On the left, the building that doesn't look like anything special is in fact one of the oldest sets of Phnom Penh's Chinese shophouses. By going around them, we can notice the architectural differences between them and an adjacent group of shophouses, the latter dating from the late 1950s.

The 1930s

When crossing Monivong Boulevard opposite the Railway Station, we make a jump in time. The first urbanization policy took place from 1889 to 1897 and was followed by a second one from the 1920s to World War II. The architect and town planner Ernest Hébrard (1875-1933) designed a plan to expand Phnom Penh, and his personality strongly influenced this



Ernest Hébrard (1875 - 1933)

An architect, urban planner and archaeologist, Ernest Hébrard is best known for the rebuilding of Thessaloniki after the fire had destroyed most of the city centre in 1917. He also worked as an archaeologist on Diocletian's palace at Split. From 1923 to 1931, he was head of the Indochina Architecture and Town Planning Service and took part in the planning of several French Indochina towns, amongst them Hanoi and Phnom Penh. E. Hébrard has created an "Indochinese style" which can still be seen in the many Hanoi buildings he designed, for example the former university of Indochina which later became the National University of Vietnam. In Phnom Penh, he was responsible for the systematic development and rationalization of the essential parts of the city as it stands today.

second period. From 1925 on Hébrard publicized a new urbanization project which proposed, among other things, to fill in the canal which surrounded the European district. This would be completed between 1928 and 1935. He did not manage to implement all the projects he described in the 1925 issue of the journal “L'éveil économique;” the park, the industrial area, and the European district of the Changvar peninsula would all only remain in the planning stage, but Hébrard has to be credited with transforming a small provincial town into a modern capital.

Beyond the canal

The Railway Station is one of Phnom Penh's first buildings to be constructed of reinforced concrete. Until then, most buildings, including Le Royal Hotel and the adjacent National Library, were built of brick and concrete with a plaster coating. If the Railway Station's iron gate is open, don't hesitate to stroll in and enjoy a somewhat surrealistic sight: empty



The railway station in 1932



The railway station, current state



Inside the station

platforms, sign boards and weight-scales from the time of the French Protectorate or the Sangkum Reastr Niyum... all as if time had suddenly stopped.

Turning north on Monivong Boulevard, we now proceed about one hundred meters, and passing the University of Medical Sciences we find ourselves at a space improperly filled by a parabolic antenna. This was the site of the Roman Catholic Cathedral, destroyed during the Khmer Rouge period. The demolition of that monumental reinforced concrete building was quite a challenge, and the task was assigned to 400 Khmers who, answering the call of the Khmer Rouge to reconstruct the country, had returned from France. The rubble of the destroyed cathedral was transported and used to build a dike twelve kilometers southeast of Phnom Penh. The iron reinforcing bars were carefully collected. Then, most of the men who performed the task of dismantling the cathedral were executed.

The building beside the site of the cathedral, currently the Phnom Penh City Hall, was once the Catholic diocese, and the cross shaped patterns with lily flowers which decorate the surrounding wall recall its former function. The size of the whole area is surprising because the Catholic population of Cambodia has always been extremely small, consisting mainly of Vietnamese communities and their local churches, all of which were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge, with one exception, which we will visit in due course.



The station, with the Cathedral in the background (1966)

Back to Wat Phnom

We are now between streets 92 and 96. The gardens between these two streets, from Monivong Boulevard to Wat Phnom, complement the buildings along the way. Immediately on the left stands Le Royal Hotel, today Raffles Le Royal, built in 1929 by Ernest Hébrard. The interior of Le Royal is worth a visit even if it emits a feeling of coldness



The hotel "Le Royal" in 1929

hardly moderated by the usual colonial patterns. Contrary to what has been repeatedly written, Le Royal Hotel was not the first hotel of European standard in Phnom Penh. The oldest one was located at Post Office Square, as we have already seen.

Adjacent to Le Royal is the National Library, built in 1922. It is an exquisite building which has been remarkably restored. Behind it is the public records office.

Immediately after the library stands the enormous building of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, which sheltered the offices of the Superior Residence at the time of the French Protectorate. It is one of the most massive buildings of the French Protectorate period. There is here a remarkable contrast between France's original moderate declarations according to which it would provide Cambodia with a vague protection respectful of royal prerogatives and this building, which couldn't better symbolize a situation intended to stand the test of time.

The reality of power was truly here, but the building would become the symbol of authority only later. In 1916, following a huge protest movement, 100,000 peasants entered the capital. While the causes of what would later become "the 1916 affair" are still not clear, historians generally agree they included heavy-handed recruitment for France's war effort and tax increases. What is striking is that the peasants totally ignored the French authorities and took their grievances directly to Cambodia's king.

In the early 1940s, the situation changed. In 1941, French authorities decided to promote a Romanized script designed to eventually replace the

Khmer script. That decision caused indignation in the Buddhist Sangha (the community of monks) and in the nationalist circles around Son Ngoc Than and the newspaper Nagaravatta. In July 1942, the monk Hem Chieu was arrested, and that arrest led directly to the famous “revolt of the parasols” in which several thousand Khmer, both monks and laymen, marched this time on the Résidence Supérieure demanding the prisoner’s release.

The last building on the right was the cercle sportif (sporting club). Built in 1929, and after a short-lived rebirth in 1993, it was later destroyed and replaced by a most inelegant set of structures.



The offices of the protectorate administration in the 1930s. Today, the ministry of finance



The library in the 1930



The sports club in the 1930s



The sports club in 1997



The sports club in 1993. Aerial view

From the top, from the bottom

Back at Wat Phnom, we can visit what remains of the so-called oldest pagoda in Phnom Penh. There are also two other monuments at Wat Phnom that generally escape the visitor's attention. If we go counter-clockwise round the hill, we actually come across an enormous clock topped by a magnificent monument.

At this point a little history is necessary. On March 15, 1907, France compelled Thailand to give back to Cambodia the territories which today correspond to the provinces of Siem Reap and Battambang. This monument upon Wat Phnom's hillside was then erected with the intention of fittingly portraying this significant event.

The propaganda lesson of this monument is designed with remarkable mastery of the Cambodian context, and nothing is missing. The two steles in Khmer and French take us back a few centuries and provide the episode with full Angkorian legitimacy. King Sisowath, who dominates the scene, sits on the throne surrounded by all the attributes of hierarchy, including his golden color. The staging is a very eloquent symbolism: on the left side of the throne stands a Indochinese soldier with a French flag over him, and on the right side three young Apsara-like girls pose in the mechanical attitude of the homage and offer King Sisowath a prasat, a stupa with a lotus flower, and a stick, the symbols of Siem Reap, Sisophon and Battambang. Could we even dream of a more explicit content? Not only does France return to Cambodia the territories which would otherwise be lost, but its protection is the very condition of Cambodia's future existence.

In a very relevant way, Wat Phnom also offers a more mundane evocation of the French protectorate saga. If you stand in front of the central stairway which leads up to the pagoda, you will notice behind the stupa on the left a little blue monument. It is a grave which escapes the attention of public. On the gravestone inscription we can read: "J. Fourcros, died on November 4, 1882 at the age of 33." This grave is an appropriate pretext to evoke a number of characters whose conduct exemplified a behavior very different from that of the "saviors" of Cambodia.

We know almost nothing about Fourcros apart from his occupation as secretary of Thomas Caraman, one of the most colorful characters described by Charles Meyer and Gregor Müller. The early stages of the protectorate went hand in hand with the arrival of adventurers who came and tried



The monument to commemorate the 1907 Franco Siamese treaty



Young Cambodian conscripts in 1916

their luck in a dodgy situation. Caraman was both the archetype and the prototype of those characters. His arrival in Cambodia roughly corresponded to the time when Phnom Penh became the capital (1865). Well informed of the social relevance of titles, Thomas Caraman became Earl Thomas de Comène Caraman, and he immediately established a relationship with King Norodom which, from disfavor to regained favor, was to last more than 20 years. Caraman's method was relatively simple: to use King Norodom's signature to order enormous quantities of objects or goods from France that the King never wished to purchase.

The bad Frenchmen

"Another "character" Thomas Caraman appears in Cambodia in 1864. He gets people to call him Jean-Thomas Commène de Caraman and plans things on a grand scale... The endless swindles of Caraman are inspired by a simple principle: to force the King's signature out of him at the bottom of a perfectly ambiguous treaty and require that the Protectorate enforce it by all the legal procedures. Most of the time it is a matter of classic confidence tricks. In this way he gets delivered to Norodom who didn't order them, 300 Champagne cases, 400 fine wines cases, dozens of Dutch gin and absinthe cases, 149 silver watches..."

The excerpt above is from Charles Meyer's *Les Français en Indochine, 1860 – 1910* (The French in Indochina, 1860 – 1910). Meyer's book contains a good anthology of the French way of life in the first period of the Protectorate.

However, the classic of its kind is *Colonial Cambodia's "Bad Frenchmen"* written by Gregor Muller. Based on exceptional researches in the public records office, the book tells with great talent of the actions of all kinds of adventurers, their search for royal favors and, of course, their problems with the protectorate authorities.

Caraman was a pioneer, and his example was soon going to arouse followers, earthy characters completely forgotten today like Blanscubé or the widow Marrot. The scandals which punctuated the relationships between Caraman, King Norodom, and the French authorities were caused by breaches in trust bordering on swindling, but the two other characters acted on a more political level, siding with King Norodom in the conflict which opposed him to the protectorate authorities in 1884.

The facts are the following: one morning, Governor Charles Thomson entered the King's bedroom with a pistol in his hand to compel the King to sign a decree transferring substantial powers to the protectorate authorities. At gunpoint, King Norodom signed, but history doesn't stop there because a rebellion broke out against the French, lasted more than one year, and faded away only when the French accepted to negotiate. Blanscubé, who initially sided with King Norodom, quickly changed sides, but the widow Marrot continued to support King Norodom and reportedly encouraged him to resist French attempts to enforce the reforms.

At the end of this stroll through the time and space of the French Protectorate, it appears clear that the colonial district within the former canal was a whole town in itself, one which offered all the necessary services for the population, mostly European, who lived there.



Thomas Caraman on the right with his monkey



Fourcros' grave in Wat Phnom

Stroll III



A Chinese interpretation of Phnom Penh

Phnom Penh is also a Chinese town, and if you want to be convinced of it, just try to go shopping at the time of a Chinese festival.

The Chinese presence in Cambodia is very ancient, if we are to believe Zhou Da Guan, who visited Angkor in 1296-1297 and who mentions the Chinese population in the country. We nevertheless have to wait till the 15th century to notice a significant Chinese presence in the region of the confluence of the Mekong and Tonle Sap known as the Four Arms. The most important migrations took place after 1679 when pro-Ming Cantonese generals gave up the struggle against the Qing dynasty and began emigrating with their troops.

We have “reliable” statistics of the Chinese population of Cambodia from 1890 onwards when 130,000 ethnic Chinese were supposed to have lived in the country. The last available estimates date back to the 1963-1966 period and mention a Chinese population of 425,000 in the kingdom.

However, it is rather difficult to determine with precision who is Chinese, as is shown by the high degree of ambiguity conveyed by the adjective “Sino-Khmer.” Would that be an ethnic Chinese living in Cambodia or a person of mixed race? Moreover, quantifying the degree of Sinity or of Khmerity is a difficult question, and no one has found a valid solution yet: religion? language? festivals? The local solution is interesting: “raw Chinese” are people often born in China who have still not adapted to Cambodian life. This “rawness” is shown by a poor command of Khmer language and by the importance of Taoist religious practices. “Cooked Chinese” are born in Cambodia, speak Khmer well, and practice Lesser Vehicle Buddhism without necessarily giving up Taoism, as is clearly shown by the crowds in the temples on the occasion of Chinese festivals.

We have to be aware that the term “Chinese” in Cambodia like anywhere else refers to a population made up of the most diverse ethnic groups, often speaking mutually unintelligible languages. The concept of “congregation” has played a very important part in the organization of the cultural and social lives of Cambodian Chinese, mainly at the time of the French Protectorate. Congregations are based on an ethno-linguistic division, and there are five of them in Cambodia: Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien and Hainan. The members of other Chinese groups too small to create a congregation had to enter one of the five congregations by their choice. Each congregation

had its headquarters in which there was a school and a temple. Phnom Penh's oldest Chinese district had three: Teochew, Hainan, and Hakka.

Stroll III

From one market to another

The oldest Phnom Penh Chinese district is located between the Royal Palace and De Verneville Canal, across which was the French district. We can begin our visit of this area at number 29 Street 15, almost on the corner of Street 110. The big white building standing there is what remains of the headquarters of the Hakka congregation, of which the temple and the school were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. A new temple was built in 2003 near the Olympic Market.

The ideal guide to capture the flavor of the place is Mr. Zhang Jr., better known by Phnom Penh foreign residents as Leo. His father, head of the Hakka congregation, made the decision to build a school, which was finally completed in 1940. Being a well-known atheist who liked to repeat, “God exists. Men invented him,” it was for him out of the question to build the school adjacent to the temple, and days of discussion were necessary for the leading citizens of the community to persuade him not to infringe upon this sacrosanct Chinese rule. The argument that carried the day was that it would be easier to collect funds for the school within the temple rather than outside. For the record, Mr. Zhang finally took his revenge when a temple manager had to be recruited. Advertising for the job was followed by interviews with numerous applicants. Mr. Zhang’s most important question was, “Do you believe in gods?” All the candidates who answered affirmatively failed. Then, a well-advised candidate answered, “To be frank, not really,” and Mr. Zhang, rubbing his hands, thought, “Here is the man I was looking for.” An atheist manager of a temple! You need to have the Hakka freedom of thought to act like that.

Hakka Chinese are renowned for their original character in the Chinese world. They originally came from northern China, and their history is made up of long migrations to southern China, Indochina, and beyond. Because of their frequent travels, Hakka women never followed the practice of binding their feet to keep them small.

Opposite the former building of the congregation stands the Old Market (Psar Chas) which was originally called the Central Market. It is the oldest

market in Phnom Penh and today is once again in the hands of Chinese-Khmer shopkeepers. This fact deserves an explanation. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, Vietnamese civilians and soldiers settled in what was the former Chinese district, as can still be seen by the numerous Vietnamese shops and coffee bars. Today, Kandal market is still in the hands of Vietnamese sellers, but Chinese who survived the Khmer Rouge regime, many back from abroad, are buying back their former houses, and the Vietnamese presence is slowly decreasing over time.





Ang Eng Street (Street 13), formerly Protectorate Street, then Ohier Street in 1910, 1972, 1993, and 2011

We now leave the Old Market for Kandal Market by walking along Street 13, (Ang Eng Street), formerly Ohier Street and before that Protectorate Street. At the time of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1955-1970), this street was considered to be the Phnom Penh's Champs Elysées, probably due to the large number of shops selling luxury items.

Chinese again

This big district, located between the Royal Palace and De Verneville Canal, was originally entirely Chinese. Ethnic Khmer could of course live there, but only according to the implicit condition that they be able to speak Teochew Chinese.

After 1979, the same district, which was largely deserted during the time of Khmer Rouge control, became populated by Vietnamese, first by soldiers and then increasingly by civilians. Numerous traces of that foreign presence are still visible, even if they slowly tend to disappear: coffee bars with low tables, pho restaurants, and small Vietnamese bookshops. After the demise of the Khmer Rouge regime, whole streets of this district were blocked and the flats used as warehouses. This was for instance the case of Street 172, where most of the flats were requisitioned to pile up "war booty." In fact, after the Khmer Rouge fled the city, the most common objects "liberated" by the Vietnamese from Phnom Penh houses and shops in the 1975-1979 period were television sets, household appliances, and the like. What became of this booty? Opinions disagree...

In any case, very few Chinese returned to this district before 1988. That year is important because it is the time when indications of the future Paris Agreements (1991) were becoming more numerous.

Many interviews highlight a considerable increase in Chinese-Khmer marriages from 1980 onwards. As a high degree of endogamy characterizes the way of life of urbanized overseas Chinese, this fact is exceedingly important.

In the 1980s, what was at stake was simple: for various geopolitical reasons which they certainly didn't understand, Cambodian Chinese were undesirable. They were barred from access to the party and administration of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), and private commerce was of course not in the regime's good graces. Marriage is one integration strategy, and the historical apex of Chinese-Khmer marriages was reached between 1980 and 1988. After that time, with the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops,

Chinese-Khmer marriages decreased as if by magic. From 1989 onward, when it became possible to buy real estate, Chinese families began settling back in their district of origin. The evolution in progress is slow, but perceptible.

The Teochew case

We parted on Street 13, which links Psar Chas (Old Market) to Psar Kandal. The street may have lost the mythical Chinese appearance it had at the time of the French protectorate or the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, but there are still many elements to analyze in the organization of the area.

As we are heading to Kandal market, we can notice the narrow entrance of a passageway between numbers 70 and 72. It looks insignificant from the street, but it is in fact a real maze with exits to all the adjacent streets. Today the passageway is stuffed with little houses and it is difficult to imagine how it looked originally, but the place is still well known by long-time inhabitants of Phnom Penh because of the famous Troeung Kok movie theater. Most movie theaters of the Sangkum period were well advertised, but this one preferred secrecy, for it was the only movie theater showing erotic films. Of course, the risqué scenes never went very far, not beyond a deep kiss or a close-up of a slightly bare breast that French films of the time used to show.

Let's stop at number 43 where there is a restaurant which doesn't look like anything special: ordinary chairs and tables and walls decorated by the ever-present galloping horses of Xu Beihong. Appearance notwithstanding, the place is worth the trip at night because it is one of the last genuine Phnom Penh bâbâ restaurants. It's proper to make it clear to possible detractors that we refuse the advertising fees we were anyway not offered. As everyone knows or should know, bâbâ is a rice porridge which has had a poor reputation since the Khmer Rouge period because at that time it was served without any side dish. Nothing like that here! You will enjoy your bâbâ with salty eggs, a heavenly ham hock or, best of all, a delicious sow's womb.

The owner is one of the last heirs of the Phnom Penh Teochew culinary tradition and prefers speaking Teochew to Khmer. He doesn't hesitate to evoke the past, notably the prosperous time of the Sangkum, but also the

Khmer Rouge period, to which he pays tribute: “Thanks to that regime, I am relieved about the coming years as I know that nothing worse can ever happen to me.”

A traditional Chinese vision comes out of his words that tells a lot about the Chinese way of life. Our friend doesn't have someone worthy to be called an heir. In his family, preparing food is a male activity, so his daughter is a priori excluded. He does have a son. “Don't think of mentioning him. He is a lazy person. Do you think he became a policeman by chance?” You can verify the implication of this innocent little question with any Chinese Cambodian who is over forty years old. Chinese people, above all those who emigrated, do not like policemen and soldiers. In fact, these two occupations are amongst the worst humanity has created. Mr. Zhang Jr., the district's unofficial historian and historiographer, will tell you ad nauseam the local version of Romeo and Juliet: because the family of a young Chinese lady didn't want her to marry the district police superintendent she was in love with, she committed suicide.



The Teochiu Temple

We go on walking towards the Royal Palace, and on the right hand side we will see the Teochew temple, which like other Chinese temples was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. This, however, did not happen to the Hokkien temple. This can be explained by the lack of a Khmer Rouge policy of planned destruction. To make the decision to destroy a building usually depended on the local Khmer Rouge leader's mood. However, the Chinese explanation of the preservation of the Hokkien temple is entirely different: after having demolished the Hakka temple, the Khmer Rouge began destroying the Hokkien temple, but while a worker was chiseling out a religious pattern from the temple wall, a tile fell from the roof and killed him instantly. This sign of what would happen to the perpetrators of such a sacrilege appears to have worked very well.

The Teochew Chinese minority has always been the most important among Cambodian Chinese minorities. Most Teochew Chinese come from the area of Swatow in Guangdong (Canton province), but insular and peninsular Southeast Asian Teochew are nowadays much more numerous than in the region they originate from. There is a good explanation to this fact: a Teochew Chinese is a born trader who was generally rich before emigrating, and emigration offered him an opportunity to increase his fortune. You will be told that Hong Kong's richest Chinese are Teochew and that the biggest Chinese Malay fortunes are of course Teochew; in short, a money making machine.

This well-deserved reputation does not always bring friends to them. Hakka Chinese, the most "intellectual" of the overseas Chinese groups, look down on them, and never would a Hakka family marry one of its offspring to a Teochew. On the other hand, Teochew Chinese will talk contemptuously about the Cantonese and their sybaritic conception of pleasure of food, a shameful diversion from the only activity worthy of its name: trade.

Today, the language taught in the Phnom Penh's Chinese schools is Mandarin, the official language of the People's Republic of China, and the other Chinese languages are at death's door. Hokkien and Hainan have only a handful of speakers, and the situation of Cantonese is not much better. However, two Chinese languages flourish: Hakkanese and Teochew. The Hakka tradition of isolation, even towards the other Chinese communities, hasn't been without beneficial consequences for their language, and in the case of Teochew, as could be expected, language has become an instrument of trade: is there a better device to communicate quietly with his compatriot from Malaysia or Thailand?

From one function to the other

We backtrack and reach Street 130, which leads to the big yellow and white Central Market. In this street, all the fashionable styles of modern Cambodia are displayed, and its architectural richness deserves a study.

At the corner of streets 13 and 130 we find the former Hôtel International, which was originally the property of a rich Cantonese family. Back from exile, the surviving members of the family attempted unsuccessfully to take the building back. The place had not only been a hotel, but also a little shopping center selling, among other luxuries, exquisite jewelry. Now divided into flats, the building is perfect evidence of the breaking up of the city after April 1975, like that of the Ripole Hotel and Docteur Bessière's clinic, both adjacent to Central Market, or Dr Keo Chea's private hospital, which is now the French Cultural Center. In other towns of the world, a building's function might change, but in the case of Phnom Penh this change is symbolic of the town's tragic past, and it is very hard to find a building where the original function has remained unchanged. In 1979, the town was repopulated by rural people who had never lived in an urban setting before. They settled in any available buildings and changed them according to the immediate needs.

Still on Street 130, at number 80, there is a magnificent row of shophouses which are among the oldest of the district. Many of them were bought back by their former owners and restored with very good taste.

The area between streets 130, 19, and 118 is now Norton University, but the appearance of the building doesn't reveal its original function. It used to be the Miche Catholic School and included a church later destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. During the 1930s and '40s, many Hokkien and Hakka Chinese enrolled in the Miche School after Chinese primary school. Attending this school provided them with the necessary "Frenchness" to hold various commercial positions, among other jobs, at the time of the French Protectorate. In 1935, the school hosted a famous guest in the



Miche school, current state

person of a certain Saloth Sar (the future Pol Pot) who, after having attended Buddhist school, thus benefited from another type of religious education.

To end this stroll with a flourish, we go to Street 144 where, adjacent to number 72, there is the Kim Son passageway between streets 144 and 148. Here again, the appearance of the place doesn't give any clue as to its original function, a theater where Chinese operas were performed.



Kim Son alley

Stroll IV

About one street

The way a street is organized corresponds to a peculiar cultural process. With time, a foreign resident of Phnom Penh loses the ability to be surprised, and the initial feeling of exoticism fades away in daily life. However, we can learn a lot about a civilization and a way of life through the decoding of a Chinese street.

A Chinese urban pattern

Sok Hok Street (St. 107) is in the middle of a second big Chinese district located directly to the west of Monivong Boulevard. A few buildings date back to the French Protectorate, but the bulk of the district was built at the time of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1955 - 1970). The basic architectural pattern is the modernist shophouse from the 1960s. The whole area made up of Sok Hok Street, adjacent streets, passageways and alleys has two characteristics: the biggest concentration of shops in the capital and one of the highest population densities in Southeast Asia.

The section of Kampuchea Krom Boulevard and Charles de Gaulle Boulevard between Sok Hok Street and Monivong Boulevard set the commercial tone of the district straightaway: the grouping of shops selling the same items. Even the pedestrian with an inquiring mind will finally get used to it, but something strange nevertheless remains when a whole street section sells coffins, another Chinese altars, and another pharmaceutical items.

To a Western mind, these groupings appear to be the opposite of commercial efficiency. The reason for this pattern of organization may be found in a particular kind of urban culture. Confucianism had a deep influence on the conception of Chinese towns: square patterns, groupings of professions according to cardinal points (for example, scholars and civil servants in the north part of the town), and above all whole streets selling the same kind of item. Contrary to the Western urban pattern, Chinese towns from at least

the 15th century were designed based on an obsessive will for bureaucratic control of the various activities, and grouping obviously helped a lot in this task. It is exactly what Etienne Balázs had in mind when he wrote: “Chinese towns never were a space of freedom.” Chinese migrants imported this grouping pattern in all of Southeast Asia because it was the only one they knew.

We can easily see this by having a look at the drugstores at the beginning of Charles De Gaulle Boulevard: the same inner design of the shops and almost identical items. A quick look at the drugs is interesting too: the important range of sex stimulants made of powdered rhinoceros horn or ground stag horn fern shows that sexual achievements stand at the core of Chinese concerns as far as health is concerned. We might also be surprised by Chinese people’s idea about medicine since sorghum and tortoise shell alcohol are for sale.



A chinese drugstore on Charles de Gaulle Boulevard

Betting on the rain

At the corner of Charles De Gaulle Boulevard and Sok Hok Street (St. 107) there is a little café run by a Hainan Chinese family. In fact, before 1975 most café owners were from the island of Hainan. This café isn’t an ordinary one because the people who bet on the rain meet right here. The idea is simple: one bets on a period of time when it is supposed to rain for the first time that particular day. The time that the first drop of rain comes out of a certain drainpipe decides who wins the competition. This kind of bet is highly questionable in the opinion of the author of these lines... especially as he lost \$40 at it. During the 1960s gambling and betting were forbidden, so according to a Chinese joke, one had to walk with eyes riveted on the ground because looking at the sky with too much insistence was for the police the indisputable evidence of betting on rain.



The café where the “betters on the rain” meet

The street of the dentists

As we go on walking on Sok Hok Street towards Orussey Market, on the right we will notice a little street (St. 166) with a good number of dental surgeries. Here trade grouping is on an equal footing with ethnic grouping because all the dentists are originally from the China’s Hunan province, and as they were not numerous enough to create their own congregation, they integrated with the Hakka congregation during the time of the French Protectorate. The protectorate authorities regarded



The dentists of Street 166

Chinese people with suspicion, and their solution consisted of integrating all the Chinese into five congregations or associations. The congregations benefited from considerable autonomy, but in return they had to keep an eye on their members.

Hunanese dentists don't study at university, but the techniques they use have been handed down from generation to generation. Hunan apparently has a very bad reputation in Chinese history because when we question them about their origin they answer they are Hakka or Shanghainese, which is obviously not the case. Their will to keep their Chinese identity is unfailing: Khmer school in the morning, Chinese school in the afternoon, Khmer language outside, but exclusive use of Chinese language at home.

Are Chinese born traders?

As we stroll along Sok Hok Street where the shops are full of all the items a human needs could give rise to, we should consider the relationship between Chinese and trade.

The famous historian and anthropologist of the Chinese in Cambodia, William Willmott, analyzed Chinese Cambodians using the notion of "plural society." Coined by American anthropology in the 1950s, the concept of "plural society" characterizes a society where economic roles are based on ethnicity. It's always the same old story: the Khmer is a rice cultivator and the Chinese a trader. In his masterpiece *Le Paysan Cambodgien* (The Cambodian Peasant), Jean Delvert adopts this vision when he writes: "There is only one national activity: agriculture. The Cambodian is a peasant. He leaves almost all the other jobs to foreigners. Conversely, he is the only one to cultivate the land. We think that it is rather unusual to find such a marked working specialization." When J. Delvert writes "Cambodian," we have of course to understand "Khmer."

The literature of the protectorate doesn't miss the opportunity to go a step further about these distinctions. Aymonier wrote of the Chinese in 1875: "In Cambodia, like anywhere else, they are arrogant and corrupting," and we can find choice cuts in the 1899 issue of *La Revue Indochinoise*: "the question always so full of interest is of the Chinese invading our colonies and taking everywhere positions which could be so usefully held by French traders..."

What is initially at stake in the debate is obvious. There were in Cambodia

important groups of Chinese involved in agriculture, as is the case with the Kampot Hainan Chinese. Other groups displayed an interest in public service before and after independence, as is the case with the Hokkien Chinese. One also tends to forget the important part played in trade by Muslim families from Southern India (Saïd, Abbdul Carime, Raguiman) before 1975. In short, generalization is unfair, and as is shown by Sok Hok Street, if a great majority of the traders are Chinese, the reverse isn't necessarily true.

The art of kuyteav

Before reaching the corner of Sok Hok and Oknha Tep Phan streets, we'll enter a little passageway which is on the right hand side. Ten meters from the entrance of the passageway, there is a little restaurant protected by a yellow awning which displays all the commonalities of Chinese Khmer aesthetics. We won't focus on these details because we are entering a historical monument: this is the place Phnom Penh kuyteav was reborn. Any Chinese Khmer can explain to you that kuyteav, a soup eaten at breakfast, is the Phnom Penh specialty par excellence and that it can't be imitated outside the capital: the kuyteav served in the provinces or Vietnamese hutieu are but tasteless imitations. Kuyteav was among the first victims of the Khmer Rouge regime, which by emptying the towns suppressed their culinary traditions too.

In 1985, as the town repopulated and the People's Republic of Kampuchea began turning a blind eye on small businesses, a Chinese former restaurant owner who had survived the Khmer Rouge regime opened precisely here the first kuyteav restaurant. This inspired man was soon the possessor of a fortune, and in 1989 he sold his restaurant to the family which runs it now.

Needless to say, one doesn't sell a true kuyteav restaurant just like an ordinary building or business because the purchaser also buys the



Sok Hok Street, Kuyteav restaurant

guarded secrets of the soup, such as the cooking time of the broth and the proportions of pig and chicken bones. Don't hesitate to have breakfast here and you'll soon become a fan of the place and its pleasant owner.

The language spoken here is almost exclusively Teochew Chinese, and many Chinese Khmer back from abroad come here to find again unique tastes that disappeared from other places. It is also here that you will take your first steps as an amateur ethnographer when you listen to an explanation of the difference between a round belly (a Chinese) and a square belly (a Khmer): the latter puts sugar into his kuyteav!

The savors of a market

As far as markets are concerned, the expatriate community is satisfied with the Russian Market or the Central Market, but few would have the idea to visit the Orussey Market, which is exactly what we are going to do. The market was rebuilt by Taiwanese, who paradoxically did their utmost to reproduce the ugliness of the markets in the People's Republic of China. Never mind the exterior aspect, for as soon as we enter, it's impossible to refrain from being guided by the aromas towards the huge food section.

The show is considerable because you will find here the most beautiful samples of Chinese emigrants' food creations, with food products which do not even exist in China like the excellent salty yellow-fleshed fish. Chinese passion for food has of course its purists, and salty eggs wrapped in a thick layer made of coarse salt and crushed charcoal will be different in every shop, with each one of them praising its own preparation. The so-called one hundred-year-old eggs don't escape this rule, and there is a battle between the defenders of modernity – pink colored eggs prepared in a chemical solution – and the defenders of tradition – eggs kept for several months in layers of rice straw and lime.

The market also has its characters, like the oldest couple of Chinese traders, both of them still perfectly raw Chinese almost unable to speak Khmer. They don't remember their age, certainly over 80. Their offspring beg them to stop working and stay at home to enjoy true Chinese filial respect, but till now without noticeable result.

These visions of food should at last be having an effect, and if your stroll takes place on a Sunday morning, you have only to go to Monivong Boulevard



Inside Oressey Market

and turn right to find Lao Difang (literally, the old place) restaurant where they serve Phnom Penh's best Dim Sum. In Cantonese, Dim Sum means "little dish" and marvelously sums up the relationship between Cantonese and gustative pleasure: to benefit from flavors as numerous as possible within one meal. The sight is also a lesson of civilization because eating Dim Sum is a ceremony with an accomplished ritual: one particular tea, the Pu'er from Yunnan, the necessary trolleys which move between the tables and, above all, the fact that on Sunday morning all three generations of a family sit together at the table.

Is Phnom Penh a Chinese town?

After these strolls in the Chinese districts, we may think this is indeed the case. However, there is a considerable difference between now and the period before 1975. Some traditions have disappeared. For instance, in



Oreussey Market's oldest couple

the past streets used to be blocked off to allow the processions of mediums at the time of Chinese festivals, something that isn't conceivable today.

We could multiply examples of the same kind, but what has really changed is of a more qualitative essence, because it is the very vision of Chinese identity which has undergone a considerable upheaval. Before people were first of all Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka... and Chinese identity was subject to belonging to a well-determined group with its own language which was much more in use than Mandarin. To this ethno-linguistic diversity, job specialization should be added: the majority of cobblers and bakers were Hakka, most automobile mechanics were Cantonese.

Nowadays, a more general Cambodian Chinese identity has emerged with a slow erasure of group peculiarities, as is well shown by the marginalization of the associations that originated with the former congregations in favor of the Association of Chinese in the Kingdom of Cambodia.

Stroll V



Stroll V

An unusual district

From the second half of 19th century, central Phnom Penh was split in three districts: a French district, a Chinese district, and a Khmer district. This situation didn't change much until 1975. One would be very wrong to look upon these districts as ghettos because ethnic groupings here are only the local translation of the very old and universal preference of people to live with those like themselves. However, diverse populations sometimes did live together in the same districts, as may be seen in the section of the French district along Sisowath Quay from Street 84 to Chroy Changva Bridge. This district actually is a perfect example of syncretism. It is indeed difficult to imagine a place where the characteristics of expatriate Frenchness are better mixed with a China of the past that today exists only in films.

French Chinese syncretism

The best place to begin visiting this district is Chinese House at the corner of Sisowath Quay and Street 84. Chinese House, which in 2008 became a bar and an art gallery, is a masterpiece of restoration mainly thanks to the art historian Darryl Collins, who lived here from 1994 to 2007. The house was built between 1903 and 1905 for Tan Bunpa, a Hokkien Chinese who grew rich through importing and exporting food products. His family lived in the house till 1975.

The building is stuffed with all the features of an eternal China which will soon exist only in books. However, one little detail will shock the connoisseur's eye. Chinese House is here very poetically translated in Chinese as "Tang Lou." "Lou," today translated as "building," originally meant "dwelling" in the noble sense of the word, and "Tang," like the Chinese character for the Tang dynasty, is a noble word which is also used to mean "Chinese." Fortunately, the two characters are traditional and artistically well written. Spot the mistake! According to Chinese tradition, street signs, especially those with poetic connotations, should be written and read from



The Chinese House

right to left, but the current owners of the house had the doubtful taste to depart from this rule.

We look back to Protectorate France by entering Street 84, formerly Rue des Ecoles, thus named because various schools stood here, amongst them the renowned Ecole Professionnelle (technical school). The school was built at the end of the 19th century and was called in the first decade of the 20th century Ecole Professionnelle et des Arts Appliqués (technical and decorative arts school). The school played the part of a faculty of fine arts before the opening of the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), one part of which can still be seen behind the National Museum whereas the other, which was located next to the old stadium, has been subjected to the madness of property speculation.

You'd better be quick because the Ecole Professionnelle will soon be only a memory: previously owned by the Army Health Services, it was mainly used as a food products warehouse before a Singapore based French company bought the land apparently with a project to build a hotel.



A building of the technical and decorative art school



Technical and Decorative Arts School

Hokkien Chinese community

Back on the Sisowath Quay, we discover twenty meters farther on the temple and school of the Hokkien Chinese community. The Hokkien come from Fukien (Fujian) province in the southeast part of China, and their presence in Cambodia is a very early one. The same minority currently makes up more than 70% of the population of Taiwan. The Hokkien in Cambodia are nowadays very much assimilated as is shown by the fact that use of their language is now restricted to a handful of elderly people.

Till 1975, most of Phnom Penh's scrap merchants were Hokkien, particularly in the neighborhood of Psar Chas. One Hokkien Chinese was particularly famous in Phnom Penh: till his death in 1970, Tan Pa was the richest person in Cambodia, and the story of his life is made up of all the idealized images emigrant Chinese people take delight in. Born in a family poor enough to refute the Khmer saying "Chinese face, face of money," he is the perfect example of a rise to success thanks to his unremitting toil which led him to become the biggest banker of Cambodia.

Contrary to other Chinese ethnic groups, Hokkien are reputed to assimilate as early as the second generation. In the chapter about Cambodian Chinese of Ethnic Groups in Cambodia, Penny Edwards provides us with an interesting explanation about this tendency to assimilation. At the time of the protectorate and the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, Hokkien Chinese, unlike other Chinese ethnic groups, had a craving for civil service and political careers, hence the necessity to appear more Khmer, or at least to put their Chineseness aside.

China in the mirror of Taoism

Few foreigners visit the Hokkien temple and this is a mistake because it is the most beautiful and genuine Chinese temple in Phnom Penh. Originally located in The Psar Chas district, the temple was rebuilt on the bank of the Tonlé Sap in the last decade of the 19th century. The move is told in an edifying story by the temple keeper. In 1887, King Norodom went to the former Hokkien temple to pray to the gods to be relieved of his health problems. That was accomplished, and as his majesty wanted to show his gratitude he offered the temple the 5,000 square meters where the temple is now located. From 1887, fifteen days after every Chinese New



The Hokkien Temple

Year, temple officials go to wish happiness to the king.

As in the other temples, at the Hokkien temple the school is located in the left part of the courtyard. According to the Chinese characters on the front of the building, we learn that the school was repaired thanks to funds offered by Haing Ngor, famous actor of “The Killing Fields” and author of the book “A Cambodian Odyssey”. Other inscriptions praise the merits of studying and of the old Confucian conceptions of loyalty and filial devotion.

On entering the temple, we will be struck by the fact that the statues of divinities are exclusively Taoist. Contrary to Vietnam Chinese temples, particularly in Cho Lon, which display features of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, Phnom Penh temples are places of worship only for Taoist divinities. Taoism is the “true” Chinese religion, contrary to Buddhism, which as an imported faith will remain for centuries the religious practice of the elite or of foreign “barbarians” like the Mongol and the Manchu. Religious Taoism has its origin in various religious practices which, among other things, fall within Shamanism. These practices were slowly codified under the doctrinal influence of what is nowadays known as “philosophical Taoism,” the basis of which is to be found in the works of Laozi and Zhuangzi. However, there is a huge gap between “religious Taoism” and “philosophical

Taoism” as the latter does not believe in the immortality of the soul and is fiercely opposed to any kind of metaphysics. Religious Taoism is based on crowds of divinities (the number of which doesn’t stop increasing), sorcery practices to reach immortality or at least longevity, resorting to mediums, and a ravenous appetite for divinatory techniques.

The best way to understand a religious practice is to pay respect to the temple’s divinities. The master of the house will provide you with incense sticks and will show you the correct procedure for their use including the number of sticks to be offered to each divinity. Don’t giggle, and be careful not to provoke the anger of the divinities by neglecting the respect they deserve.

A temple has always a main god, who is often particular to that temple. Here it is the statue leaning against the back wall of the temple, topped by an inscription modestly describing the god as the “emperor of divine beings.” After having worshipped all the divinities, you will put the last joss sticks in the central urn and insert a banknote in the slot of the adjacent box. This moment is highly sacred and will be accompanied by the sound of a gong. Don’t forget to notice on the left the banknote burner which is here to remind us of the materialist basis of Chinese religion. Another essential component of a Taoist temple is the aquarium with the sacred fish on the right side.

The maintenance of a temple needs funds, so besides the gifts furtively inserted in the box, you can take a most expensive plunge and have an inscription of your choice artistically written on a three meter long wooden panel. The panel will then be hung from the ceiling and will show your generosity forever. As we enter the temple, the first such hanging panel bears the following inscription: “wo qi li jiu” which is translated by “my mind is li jiu.” The person who had the panel carved is a Chinese Khmer from France, and “li jiu” is probably the place in China where his family was originally from.

Let’s move on to more serious matters! In the back of the temple, on both sides of the central divinities, there are mural paintings with numbers and texts summing up all the answers essential to existence. In Chinese life, divination holds an essential place, and even the strongest atheists and most rational persons have recourse to it. For example, take the cylindrical pot with sticks from the little table in front of the main divinity and prepare your question in your mind. Shake the pot with small jerky motions in order to make only one stick fall out, and then read the number on it. This is not

enough, however, and you have to use a checking technique: near the pot of sticks, there are two crescent shaped pieces of wood, each with a convex side and a flat one. Throw them on the floor, and if the two don't lie on the same side – either the convex side or the flat one – you can be sure that the numbered stick is the right one. However, if this is not the case, you will have to start all over again and once more throw the two pieces of wood. The next thing to do is to go see the divination specialist sitting at the adjoining table. He will learnedly read to you the wall inscription corresponding to the stick's number and will give you a little red sheet containing the answer to your question. One last detail to ensure total effectiveness of the procedure: don't forget to offer a banknote to the divination specialist.

If we enter Street 82, which runs alongside the temple school, we can notice on the right a long yellowish building. The inscriptions on the three pediments over the building have faded away. A few years before, one could easily decipher the function of the place: a Citroen warehouse and a primary school for the children of the Cambodian employees of the company. The beautiful sliding doors which filled connoisseurs with admiration were replaced not long ago by metal shutters just like those used to close small shops.



At the Cantonese place

As we are back on Sisowath Quay, we can shortly see a small passageway on the left into which we step with an appropriate smile. We are now in the place of the former Cantonese congregation and school.



The former school of the Cantonese congregation

The Cantonese community is with the Hokkien's the oldest Chinese community in Cambodia. This community, which has lived above all in Phnom Penh, came from the regions south and east of Canton, mainly from Nan Hai district. Before the Khmer Rouge, this community was numerically the second most important Cambodian Chinese community after the Teochew, with whom Cantonese did not really have a lot in common. This can be well understood when we get the measure of the proclivity for pleasure of the sybaritic Cantonese. If you need to be convinced of this, just sit down in the morning in any Cantonese restaurant in the world, for instance Phnom Penh's Lao Difang, and you will see people spending lazy hours enjoying their Dim Sum, reading newspapers, or trying to solve the world's problems: in short, a strong denial to the received idea that a trader is hiding behind every Chinese. All these activities are perfectly antithetical to the sacrosanct requirements of the trading activities to which Teochew devote most of their time.

Apart from eating, what did Cantonese do in Cambodia? Most garage

owners and blacksmiths were Cantonese, as well as sculptors, calligraphers, and picture framers. This last activity, well represented in the first section of Charles de Gaulle Boulevard, still remains exclusively Cantonese. Is that all? During the 1930s a Frenchman got a young Cantonese lady pregnant and abandoned her in a very ungenerous way. The young lady, later known as Madame Choum, became the most important Cambodian madam. She set up an establishment in Chamkar Mon where all the fantasies the human mind could conceive were actually fulfilled. This was not a very rare occurrence, and in fact the Cantonese had the reputation of being the only Chinese streetwalkers in Cambodia.

We now have to keep a straight face as we are entering a school, as is shown by an inscription above the archway: "Second Gym Room." The sight is startling because the monumental aspect of the building is in sharp contrast to the way the place has been sliced up into more and more numerous little Vietnamese dwellings which end up assaulting the original architecture.

We leave the school to go back to the section of Sisowath Quay between streets 82 and 80. On the left we can notice a pediment with a barely readable inscription in Chinese topped by a date 193... The missing number is hidden by a shophouse someone had the surrealistic idea to build here. 1930 is the official date of the establishment of the Cantonese congregation in this place. The former premises were located about one hundred meters to the west.

The best is still to come. After passing Street 80, we can notice on the left a lane with no number, and if we raise our eyes we discover the superb and almost intact east side of the Cantonese congregation's temple. The sight is worthwhile and displays a wealth of representation of nature: beautifully glazed earthenware that represent flora and fauna, ornaments of the Taoist cult. The central vault is topped by an inscription that sets the right tone: "Mountain of the Jade Palace." This is the oldest Chinese temple in Phnom Penh and its most ancient part dates back from the second half of 18th century.

The temple has literally been subject to vampirism: cast a glance into the room through the second door on the right and you'll see a majestic column driven into a superb tiled floor, the whole splendidly integrated into the most profane house. The inhabitants of the apartment on the left simply added a wall and kept the original roof. In the central part of the building two little apartments were built between two wooden panels beautifully inscribed with golden letters.

The coming of the Khmer Rouge in 1975 dealt a severe blow to the very urban Cambodian Cantonese community, which would never recover its important prewar status. In the late 1980s, survivors back from abroad attempted in vain to recover the temple and the adjoining buildings. In the meantime, the whole district had been populated, not to say overpopulated, by Vietnamese who are still living here, as is shown by the numerous typically Vietnamese cafés with chairs and tables almost at ground level and store front signs written in Vietnamese.

The Cantonese community, which by then had partially reconstituted, rebuilt its temple, school and headquarters near the Olympic Market in the 1990s: tasteless constructions in the style of cheap shophouses which bear little resemblance to the magnificence of the former buildings.



The former Cantonese Temple



The Cantonese Temple in the early 20th century



The former Cantonese temple. Current state.

The sacred and the profane

Starting from the central part of the temple, a little passageway will lead us to the former “Providence” district. This formerly posh area of the French district is today little more than an accumulation of jerry-built constructions arranged anarchically along unexpected and nameless alleys.

The church at the end of the passageway was built at the end of the 19th century by the Sisters of Providence of Portieux, who settled in Cambodia in 1881. They established a convent, a hospital, and a school for young girls, who were taught French, among other subjects. The district was then dubbed “Providence” after the name of the congregation, and it kept this name during the time of the French Protectorate and the Sangkum Reastr Niyum. This Catholic church is one of the last to remain from pre - 1975 Phnom Penh, all the others having been systematically destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. The reason why it did not meet the same fate as the others is still obscure.

The church’s outer structure is practically intact if we leave aside the house clinging to it. However, the inside has been divided up into square rooms where families settled beginning in 1979. The contrast between the plywood of the partitions and the church’s vaulted ceiling is striking.

If a picture had to be selected to represent Cambodia’s modern history, this church would suit perfectly: it characterizes the fate of many of Phnom Penh buildings, with nothing remaining of their original function. In 1979, as the town became repopulated, one survived by settling down wherever possible, often in conditions hardly believable nowadays. In that situation, a church could suit very well.



Providence Church

History and literature

North of the space between the Providence Church and the Chroy Changvar Bridge is a school located on the site of the former French cemetery, also named Providence Cemetery, where French war veterans were buried. Today nothing remains of it except a few dozen square meters where one can only guess the locations of the graves. Several gravestones that were found are kept today in the park of the French Embassy.

People generally agree on the fact that the cemetery was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. We have no doubts about the Khmer Rouge's hatred of symbols of the western world, and it is quite conceivable that they razed a part of the cemetery, but according to the district inhabitants, the main part of the cemetery disappeared during the 1980s.

Although there are many details of daily life that are not taken into account by history, we can still know them thanks to literature. In the years that followed the Khmer Rouge regime, people wrote frenetically, as if they had to exorcise the fact that Democratic Kampuchea had outlawed writing. A few years ago, one could still find in the markets little yellowed notebooks which admirably described life in the 1980s. One theme is very often found in the books: digging in search of gold in the places where rich people lived or were buried. The writer Kong Bunchoeun has described the picture of Cambodian people digging desperately in search of treasures. It was thought that the graves of foreigners surely contained gold, and it was mainly during this period that the destruction of Providence Cemetery took place.

This district has shown us more than one hundred years of Phnom Penh's history, and we can only hope that it will not fall victim to the ravenous appetites of property developers.

The Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1955 - 1970): the prince and the architect

As the French Protectorate (1863-1953) drew to an end, the face of Phnom Penh changed drastically. The sleepy little provincial town described by writers of the protectorate period gave way to the capital of a state with modernity as its key word.

Changing the face of power

One cannot easily appreciate the view the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (SRN) had of power. Many buildings in the Chamkar Mon district still have an official function, like the Senate and the Constitutional Council. This is the reason why we reluctantly have not included the area in our strolls. However, if by any chance you have the opportunity to visit these places, don't miss it at any cost.

If you go down Norodom Boulevard and pass Independence Monument towards Monivong Bridge, you will see on your left a huge complex called Chamkar Mon. Most of its buildings were erected from the late 1950s to 1966. A little history is necessary to understand what is at stake in this complex. In 1955, King Sihanouk abdicated in favor of his father Suramarit and from that time became Prince Sihanouk. The object of this move was simple as Prince Sihanouk intended to rule rather than to reign. He then set up a political structure named Sangkum Reastr Niyum (SRN), which translates in English as "People's Socialist Community." It was not just a political party, but a huge movement which aimed to mobilize the lifeblood of the country. The SRN ruled over Cambodia from 1955 until the 1970 coup.

It was in fact a revolution which took the form of a restoration. In Cambodia, the ninety years of the French Protectorate slowly clipped the prerogatives of the Cambodian monarchy. Even if he was revered like a god by his subjects, the monarch under the French Protectorate only ratified

decisions taken by protectorate authorities.

From the time Phnom Penh became the capital of the kingdom (1865), the exercise of power was located in the protectorate buildings around Wat Phnom. Here all decisions were taken. At the Royal Palace, power was only symbolic.

Independence from France and Sihanouk's will to rule gave birth to a new political order, and this radical change in politics led to the construction of new symbols of power.

In the early 1950s, Chamkar Mon was nothing but a marshy area, drainage for monsoon rains. Filling it up and replacing it with the masterpieces of architects Vann Molyvann and Lu Ban Hap created this magnificent complex.

Public and private space

The driveway which starts from the main entrance of Chamkar Mon divides the space in two almost equal parts. On the left is an official area, where the office of the guards and the State Palace stand. On the right is another complex with the residences of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Princess Monineath, Princess Bopha Devi and other members of the royal family. We should not fail to mention the movie theater, especially when one knows Prince Sihanouk's passion for the cinema.

The State Palace, which we can see from the entrance, was designed by Vann Molyvann and unveiled on the occasion of General de Gaulle's visit in 1966. Besides Norodom Sihanouk's offices, the building housed guest rooms in its east wing. All the characteristics of Vann Molyvann's style are here: the famous ventilation systems and the V shaped roofs. On that subject, it has been said that it is no more no less than a combination of the initials of the architect's surname and given name.

Today, the State Palace houses the Senate and is also used to organize official receptions. The building is impressive, but its cost was modest: due to the economic difficulties of the time, Vann Molyvann explained that it was decided to use only local material such as Kampong Cham red sandstone. The building was consequently dubbed "the Red House."

To the left of the palace, there was a stadium where football matches took place between Norodom Sihanouk's personal team and foreign diplomats.

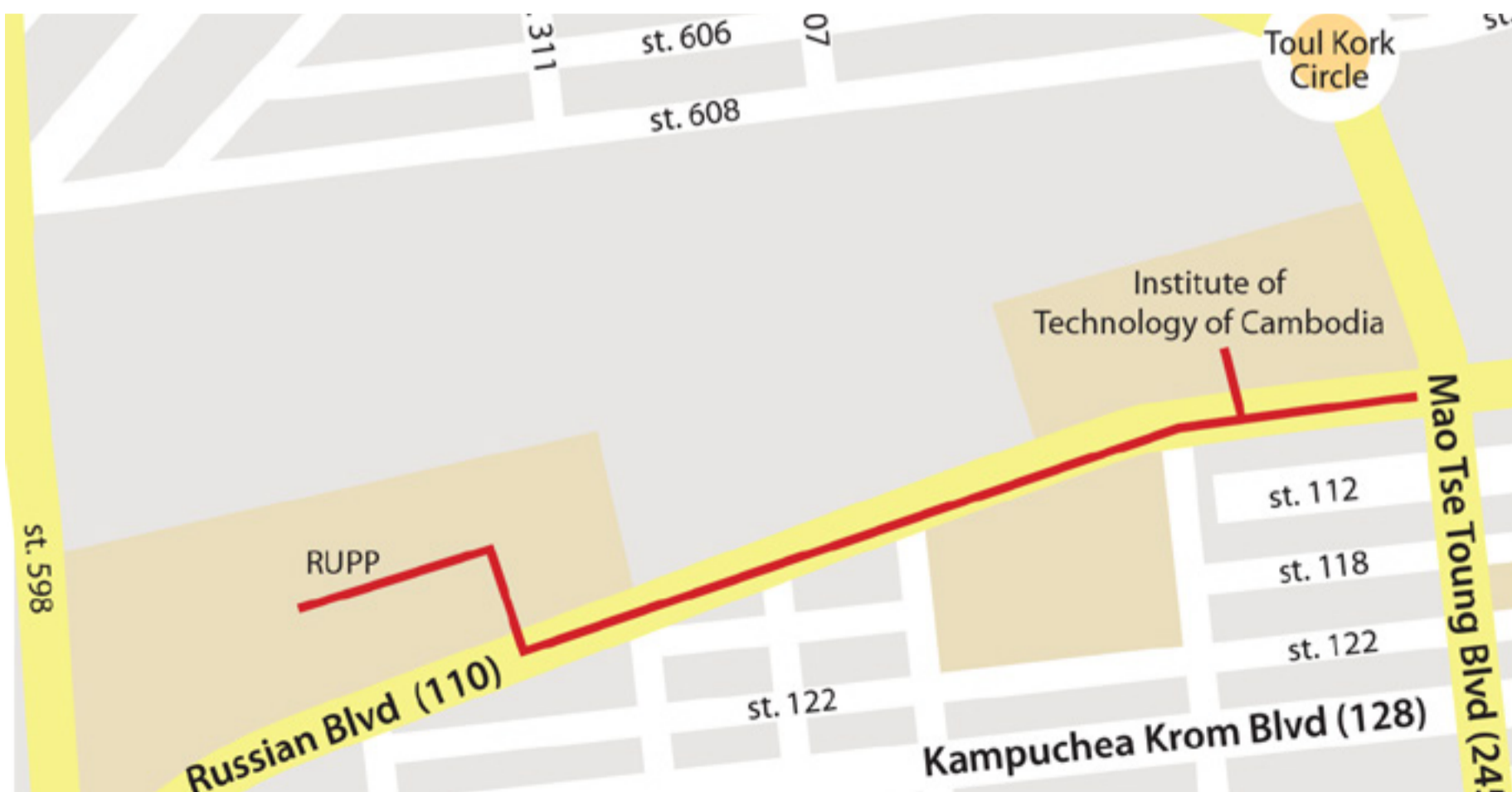
Customs change with time, and a few years ago the stadium was transformed into a golf course.

The area to the right of the driveway consists mainly of residences for members of the royal family. Despite the importance of the occupants, this architectural grouping is very simple: Prince Sihanouk's house and Princess Bopha Devi's house are of modest proportions, and nothing reveals the nature or function of the residents.

The simplicity of the premises is on an equal footing with the exuberance and the eccentricity of the architectural forms of the 1960s. We can never emphasize enough the fact that Cambodia was during the 1960s the only Southeast Asian country to innovate in the field of architecture.

After the March 1970 coup d'état, Lon Nol took up residence in Chamkar Mon, and he even had a bunker built there in 1971. During the Khmer Rouge period, some buildings were damaged, but the complex remained amazingly intact, particularly if we take into account all the destruction that took place in those years.

Stroll VI



Stroll VI

The education policy of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum

The SRN showed an unprecedented effort in the field of education with the development of primary schools, junior high schools, high schools and also the first Cambodian universities.

The vision the SRN had of education can still be visited today. If you go down Russian Confederation Avenue, you'll see a huge complex that extends from the Institute of Technology of Cambodia (ITC) to the six floor building that houses the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP). Most of these university buildings were erected in the 1960s.

The break

Analyzing SRN education policy presupposes taking into account that of the French Protectorate. The protectorate implemented a double break, first by establishing French teaching centers (French-Khmer public schools) aimed at training the protectorate's local civil servants, and then by creating the system of renovated pagoda schools where modern subjects were added to traditional Buddhist teaching. The system did not establish itself smoothly because the monks were not happy to give up a part of their prerogatives. One has also to mention the resistance of Cambodians who had benefited from French education, for instance Prince Areno Yukanthor, who thought that any form of traditional education, even a reformed one, was aiming at "keeping us ignorant."

Prince Sihanouk's SRN inherited a far from brilliant situation. Pre-war statistics speak for themselves: in 1932-1933, there were 225 renovated pagoda schools in the country, and this number increased to 908 in 1938 - 1939. For the whole period 1932-1939, there were only eighteen French-Khmer public schools, whereas it had been planned to transform all renovated pagoda schools into French-Khmer public schools, as the latter offered a comprehensive primary level curriculum. A comprehensive secondary education curriculum would only be created in 1935 when Sisowath junior high school became a high school.

Following UNESCO recommendations in 1953, a revolution in education occurred in the first years after independence. Between 1955 and 1958 the number of Khmer public schools (the new name for French-Khmer public schools, with the same curriculum) increased from 1352 to 1653. In the field of secondary education, figures are even more eloquent: from eleven schools in 1956 to eighteen in 1958 and to twenty-nine the following year. The Cambodian state made a big effort as far as universities were concerned with expansion of the University of Phnom Penh and the building of the universities of Takéo-Kampot and Batdambang.

The break with the preceding period is obvious: the number of students at all levels rose from 432,649 in 1956 to 1,160,456 in 1969.

The Cambodian university

The master plan of the university campus was designed by two French architects, Leroy and Mondet, on the eve of independence in 1953. The campus was then developed by various architects over a period of ten years.

The first building we can see on the left is the Institute of Technology of Cambodia (ITC). Being part of the Khmer-Soviet technical and scientific cooperation agreement signed by Norodom Sihanouk and Nikita Khrushchev in 1961, ITC was inaugurated in September 1964. This work of Soviet architects is remarkably functional, and the team who designed ITC spent a lot of time studying how to adapt architecture to tropical heat and humidity. The complex, which has little changed, is divided into four parts: an administrative building, teaching buildings, a swimming pool, and teachers' accommodations, which were destroyed in 2006.



The Institute of Technology of Cambodia in 1964

Once independent, Cambodia had an urgent need for highly qualified engineers. Every year, ITC received over one thousand students who were trained by about one hundred Soviet teachers who stayed on in Cambodia till 1975. A funny little detail: French was the language of instruction.

During Pol Pot time, ITC became a transit camp. In the 1980s, it reverted to its original function, and Soviet professors taught there till 1991, this time in Russian. In 1993, France came back into the picture with an ambitious program of building restoration and setting up the curricula. Subsequently, ITC trained 500 engineers and technicians every year.

The university complex's architectural masterpiece is located 200 meters from ITC and was built to house Phnom Penh's Ecole Normale Supérieure (Teacher Training College). The three original buildings still exist: the central building, now the English department, the row of amphitheatres, now the French department, and the round library, which today still fulfills its original function.

Financed by France, the complex was designed by Vann Molyvann, who had been selected among candidates including Leroy and Mondet. As he left Cambodia shortly after March 1970 coup d'état, Vann Molyvann did not attend the college's opening in 1972.

The charm of the complex was due to a system of basins, but two of them have been filled in. The central building was originally surrounded by water and could be reached across a bridge adorned with Nagas. Apart from its aesthetic qualities and the originality of its forms, the complex displays a remarkable functionality as regards light and ventilation. We can notice the ingenious "Vann Molyvann windows" thanks to which one can work in well-ventilated amphitheatres even in the warmest part of the day. The red color of the bricks contrasts with the white parts of the buildings and with concrete elements left unpainted, such as the two Naga bridges. When a student pronounced his amazement at the unpainted concrete, Vann Molyvann answered that the choice not to paint it was intentional because an architect should not be ashamed of the material he uses.

Although the various parts are still here, the whole has changed a lot. Several new buildings have been added: on the left a tasteless building houses the communications institute, in the back part of the perimeter there is a huge block of teaching rooms which reminds one of a pile of rabbit hutches, and crowning it all is the Japanese cultural center on the right side of the central building. Without being a spoilsport, one cannot help thinking that the result is unsightly. For those who knew the much

Vann Molyvann

Born in 1926 in Ream, Kampot province, he was among the first Cambodians to pass the Baccalaureate exam at the Sisowath high school. From 1947 to 1956, he studied at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts (National School of Fine Arts) in Paris and worked in France as an architect. Back in Cambodia in 1956, he was appointed chief architect for state buildings. In 1962, he was appointed to the ministry of civil engineering and telecommunications. In 1965, as the first dean of the Royal University of Fine Arts, he transformed a traditional small school of arts into a university worthy of the name. After several important ministry positions from 1967 to 1970, he left Cambodia in 1971. From 1972 to 1979, he lived in Switzerland where he went on practicing and teaching architecture. He came back to Cambodia in 1991 and was successively advisor to the Cambodian government, minister of culture, and president of APSARA authority. In 1996 he was elected a member of the French Academy of Architecture.

In addition to his political and teaching activities, he made great architectural achievements, designing projects for almost eighty buildings in Cambodia. To talk about the architecture of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum means to mention first the name of Vann Molyvann. Many of his works are still here or could be seen not long ago. We can mention Independence Monument, the Teacher Training College (now the Institute of Foreign Languages of the Royal University of Phnom Penh), the Chaktomuk conference hall, the National Theater (destroyed by a fire in 1994 and later razed), and in Chamkar Mon, the State Palace as well as offices, houses and the reception hall.

more open and spacious campus at the end of the 1990s, the changes of the past ten years makes them ill at ease.

The next part of the complex, The Faculty of Arts and Sciences, is dominated by a huge six floor building. Inaugurated in 1962, it originally was a high school for 3,500 students. The plans were designed by the French architects Leroy and Mondet. The building displays a number of architectural clichés of the time and one cannot refrain from noticing Le Corbusier's influences.





The buildings of the Teachers Training College in 1972 and today. Now, the Institute of Foreign Languages

We have little information about Leroy and Mondet and we don't even know the names of the engineers they worked with. Nevertheless, one thing is sure: to have this enormous reinforced concrete mass supported only by a few columns is a technical exploit which could only have been accomplished by highly qualified engineers.

It's worth going up to the higher floors and entering a classroom to notice the natural ventilation system. For splendid views, try to visit the 2000 square meter terrace-roof where lectures are still delivered.

Today, the building houses the science departments and also the Khmer literature department. Social sciences are taught in another campus on the left side of

the road three kilometers from Pochentong airport. It was inherited from the People's Republic of Kampuchea during which time it was the training school for People's Revolutionary Party officials.



The main building of the Royal University of Phnom Penh



The main building of the Royal University of Phnom Penh

Back to the six floor building, on its right side there is a strange structure which doesn't seem to have a well-established function: is it a hall for ceremonies or lectures? It is a 1,850 cubic meter concrete shell with a parabolic shape. One could hesitate about its function because the strong point of a building with a parabolic shape is not its acoustic qualities. Recently restored, it can hold 1,000 people for congresses.

Two perfectly unknown persons

Despite the quality of their architectural achievements, we know almost nothing about André Leroy and Mondet. The two architects came to Cambodia in the time of the Protectorate and remained after independence.

Leroy was born in Paris in 1908 and got training in the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts de Paris (National School of Fine Arts of Paris). He is believed to have passed away in 1965 before the completion of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, the master plan of which he had designed with Mondet.

As we don't even know his Christian name, our knowledge about Mondet is even smaller, apart from two small details: training in the Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture (Special School of Architecture) and a real taste for financial gratuities. This "oversight" is all the more surprising since together or separately they designed high quality buildings like the Independence Hotel in Sihanoukville and the master plan of The Royal University of Phnom Penh. On a more trivial point, it seems that the two architects did not enjoy a good reputation with their colleagues as is suggested in parts of the correspondence between Vann Molyvann and Vladimir Bodianski.

The end of a time

The importance of the university complex and the quality of its buildings are enough to convince us of the importance SRN attached to education. Yet in spite of all those efforts, SRN has been considered a failure in the field of education by specialists such as David Ayres. According to him: “Throughout the newly independent nations of Asia and Africa, education was pursued with promises of rapid development and rapid modernization. The promised riches were not forthcoming, resulting in dissatisfaction...” The SRN educational system was caught in a stranglehold between modernity and tradition. The desire for modernity was translated into an educational policy unsuited to the needs of a country where 80% of the population had its income from agricultural activities. Ayres concludes that: “Students’ perceptions of their future, created by the very nature of the educational system, were incompatible with the social and economic capacity of the country to absorb their aspirations.”



Vann Molyvan as Minister of Education

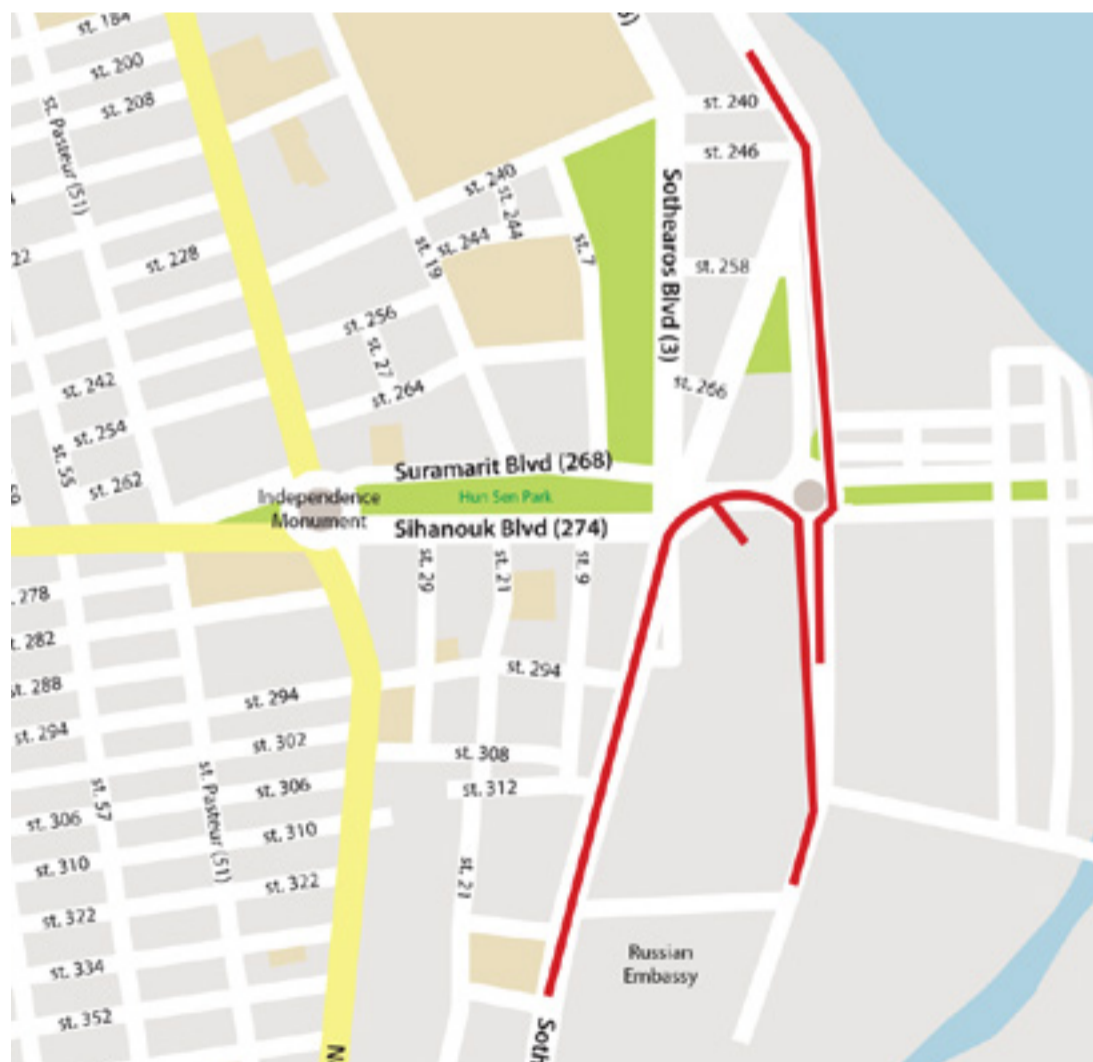
As a matter of fact, in Cambodia, just like in many other countries in the 1960s, education was seen as a way to escape from peasant conditions and become a white collar worker. Yet from the early 1960s, the Cambodian government could not absorb any more civil servants. This phenomenon

was brilliantly analyzed by Jean-Claude Pomonti and Serge Thion in their book « Des courtisans aux partisans » (From Courtiers to Partisans).

We nevertheless have to put this so-called failure in perspective. During the 1960s, in Cambodia as everywhere else, considerable hopes were set on education. In the end, the result was disappointment and the abandoning of the illusion that education would put right social disparities. What can be criticized is an excessive zeal which, by not taking into account the economic realities of the country, did not allow the development of a relevant education system.

SRN's education system deserves better than condemnation. One has only to meet teachers trained in that period to be aware of the quality of their preparation. Cambodian university text books of that time are very often of a higher quality than those used now. In 1979, the SRN-trained teachers who survived the Khmer Rouge regime were the first to revive the Cambodian education system.

Stroll VII



Stroll VII

At the water's edge: the development of the banks of the Bassac River

The SRN also had an ambitious development policy as regards the banks of the Bassac River. Most of the buildings mentioned below can still be seen, even if some of them are in a pitiful state.

The best place to begin this stroll is in front of the Russian Embassy on Sothearos Boulevard. Even if you can't get in, you will have a good idea from outside. Originally, part of this complex was designed by the French architect Henri Chatel. This reminds us that SRN architecture was of a very eclectic nature: architects of various nationalities and trainings made their contribution to this huge adventure, and the result of all this was the architectural heritage of the SRN.

The building you are standing opposite was built in 1963 to accommodate the personnel of the National Bank, the plans of which were also designed by Henri Chatel. Chatel's aim was to try to discover functional and elegant solutions to adapt reinforced concrete buildings to restraints imposed by Cambodia's climate. The famous VV shaped roof, still very well discernible, was one of these solutions. This structure offered protection from the sun and violent rains, and at the same time provided the residents with a space for entertaining purposes as well as functional purposes such as the drying of clothes. This roof, which here appeared for the first time in Chatel's structures, became one of the symbols of the new Cambodian architecture.

The building wasn't greatly affected by the ups and downs of Cambodian history because it was offered to the Soviet Union in 1979 as an embassy. The Soviet Union spent four million dollars to renovate it and to create housing for more than 300 embassy personnel.

Vampirization

If we go on in the direction of Suramarit Avenue, we'll find various buildings which did not have the same luck. The construction commonly known simply as the "building" doesn't show anything of its past splendor. It is now made up of a set of squats and its outside as well as inside architecture has been remodeled by the post-1979 occupants to meet immediate needs which de facto exclude the former aesthetic configuration.

The building of this complex was part of Prince Sihanouk's concerns for meeting the public's housing needs. In 1961, before the construction of the "building", Prince Sihanouk wrote to Oknha Tep Phan, the Phnom Penh governor: "I do not think it necessary to remind you of the social and hygiene problems, the fire risk and transport problems associated with unplanned development on the periphery of the town. We must begin the construction of low-cost apartment buildings that can be rented or sold to average or small-income families. This will no doubt take some time and require progressive planning and investment." Concerns of that nature make you wonder about today's Cambodia.



A stairway of the Building

Designed by the architects Lu Ban Hap and Vladimir Bodiensky, the plans took into account tropical climate and proposed adequate solutions for ventilation. Nevertheless, at that time, the complex was criticized because it broke with both the style of traditional Khmer houses on stilts and that of Chinese shophouses with space on the ground floor to be used for commercial purposes.

Today, according to specialists, the decaying complex cannot be restored as it has not taken care of for more than thirty years. Two of Rithy Panh's films partially shot in the "building" provide us with information about the



The banks of the Bassac river in the early 60s. In the foreground, the apartments for the personnel of the National Bank, today the Russian Embassy. On the right. the olympic Village apartments, on the left the Building.

evolution of the place and its current state of decay, “An Evening after the War” and “The Actors of the Burned Theater.”

Modification

Behind the “building” stands another construction whose current appearance does not hint in any way at its former function: the apartments of the Olympic Village. In anticipation of the Southeast Asian Games which should have been held in Phnom Penh in 1964, the decision was taken to build this Olympic Village. As the games never took place, a number of apartments were given to the Ministry of Education to accommodate its personnel, and the remaining flats were sold to civil servants. The roofs of the Olympic Village apartments are flat, contrary to undulating or VV shaped roofs in vogue at that time.

Occupied by squatters after 1979, the building was sold in 1996 to a Malaysian company that intended to transform it into a luxury hotel.

Instead, the result was uniform rabbit cages. The white paint added subsequently does not remove the depressing impression we feel in front of the complex. The premises, known today as Phnom Penh Center, are now rented to private universities such as Build Bright or Khemarak.

Destruction

As we reach the traffic circle at the junction of Suramarit and Sothearos Boulevards, we turn right. One of the first buildings, distinguishable thanks to its red color, is the Sangkum Reastr Niyum Exhibition Hall, built in 1961 from Vann Molyvann's plans. SRN was fond of this kind of structure, which presented the advances made by Cambodia in the Sihanouk years. The services of other architects were called upon to design buildings with an identical function all over Cambodia, architects such as Lu Ban Hap, Seng Suntheng, and Roger Colne, who designed the famous Kampot Exhibition Hall. These architects were appointed not only to design a building's plans, but also to define its content: from the beginning, these buildings were conceived according to the objects which would be exhibited. The objects and photographs displayed were representative of themes such as the industrial development of Cambodia, fine arts, town development, the craft industry... in short everything to show that the main characteristics of the period were a complete break with past practices.

Today the building Sangkum Reastr Niyum Exhibition Hall bears the following name "National Cultural Center." Those who visit it, for instance on the occasion of the kites exhibition, would be right in questioning the accuracy of the adjective "cultural." In any case, what emerges from all that is an impression of emptiness, even of unease.

A few more steps and we are in front of one of the no man's lands we have gotten used to in contemporary Cambodia: Preah Suramarit, the former national theater. It is another Vann Molyvann masterpiece that we can admire today only in photographs. Vann Molyvann said the plans were based on a triangular module inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright, with an organic design that explodes in the pyramidal form of the roof. According to Vann Molyvann, this was the achievement he was most proud of. In the 1960s the theater housed the National Conservatory of the Performing Arts, and more than 400 artists worked here. This theater had a strange

destiny: it survived the war years and lack of maintenance but met its end by being accidentally destroyed in a fire when it was being restored in 1994. We could still visit the ruins in 2007 before bulldozers finally went into action. Before the ruin was destroyed, the place was the setting of Rithy Panh's film "The Actors of the Burned Theater." The film is about a group of actors who lived there despite all opposition, keeping alive the traditions of Khmer traditional shadow theater as well as the techniques of making small and big leather puppets.



Suramarit Theater, destroyed by a fire in 1994

Architectural regression

Retracing our steps, once we have reached the traffic circle, we can contemplate on the right two masterpieces of contemporary Cambodia: the Buddhist Institute and Naga Casino.

Of the latter, there is not much to say: a most inelegant bunker the stroller may not even notice as there increasingly are more and more buildings of the same kind. On the other hand, the Buddhist Institute as seen from afar displays some kind of originality, but this disappears as soon as we get nearer. It is a very artificial originality with the claim to imitate, with very imperfect results, the triangular and hatched forms of the 1960s. The result of all this is a kind of socialist realist monument in praise of some worker hero or brave soldier. And where is Buddhism in all that?

The Buddhist Institute was originally housed in premises facing the present Himawari Hotel. These premises became those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1980 to 2007. The Buddhist Institute which disappeared in 1974 was reopened in Unnalom Pagoda in 1989.

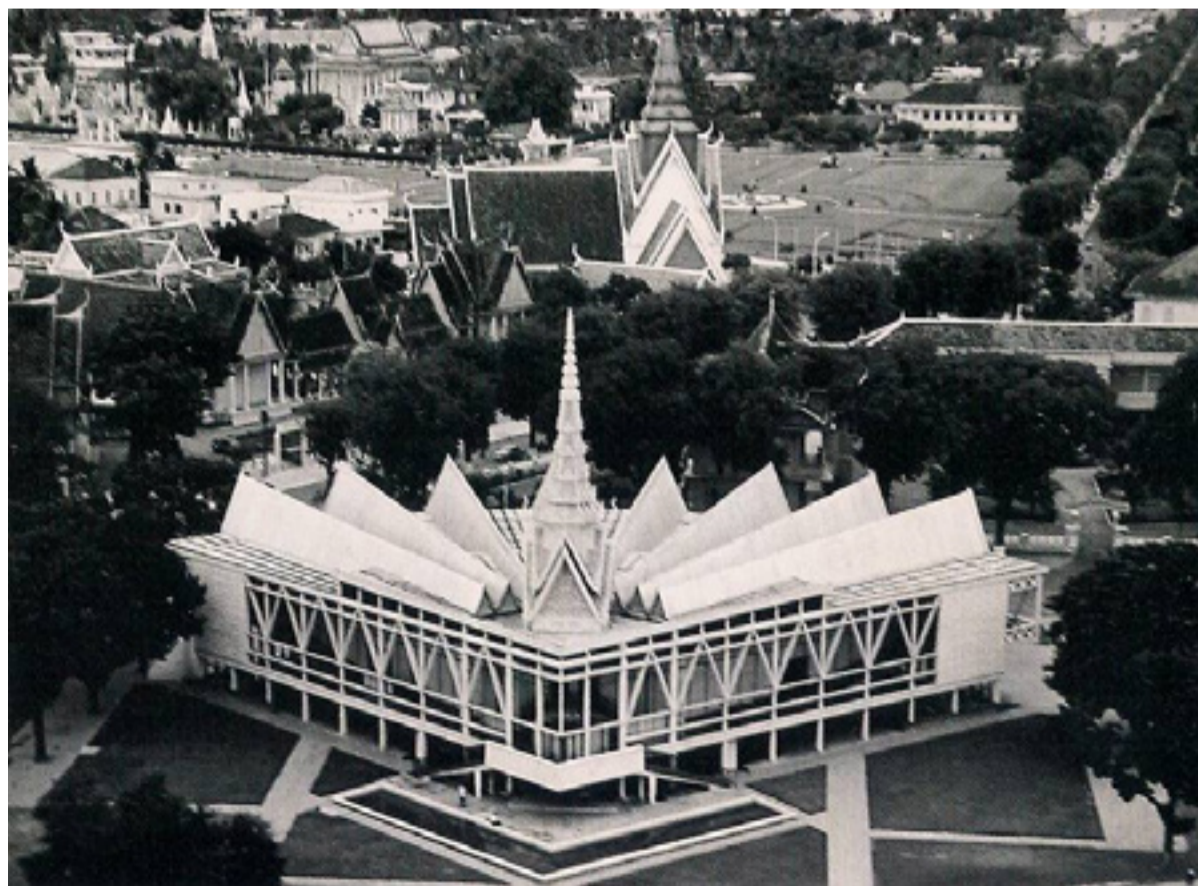
If we think that the Buddhist vision of the world deserves an adequate architecture, we might as well question the relevance of the former locations; they are nonetheless masterpieces compared to the last refuge of the Cambodian Theravada tradition. If you have time to spend, just go in and visit the teaching rooms: as they are full of awkward angles, they will bring you an inimitable feeling of ill-being. Later on, the architect justified himself by saying that his plans were unsatisfactorily revised. The most entertaining thing about it, if we think about the profound lack of interest Buddhism shows for the material world, is that the minimal distance provided for by law between Naga Casino and Buddhist Institute has not been respected.

Back to SRN

Leaving the Naga Casino on the left, we now go down the street along the Bassac River to the Hotel Cambodiana. The hotel is the work of the architect Lu Ban Hap. As regards the conception of the inner part of the building, the design is by King Father Norodom Sihanouk.

In addition to the hotel itself, there was originally a water sports complex and a casino. 1969 was for Cambodia the year of constant dangers, and Prince Sihanouk wasn't unaware of it. In fact, one of his last films was titled "Sunset." For the state, to collect taxes is a tricky exercise in Cambodia, taxpayers having a very restricted fiscal consciousness. On the other hand, having recourse to gambling to put money into the state coffers was a good old method that had proved its worth, and in this context the Cambodian state casino opened in February 1969. As soon as it was opened, thousands of Cambodians rushed in and tragedies began to increase: ruins and suicides. Many texts written at the time, amongst them Charles Meyer's *Behind the Khmer Smile*, reminded the reader of the old prophecy about "the silver and golden towers" built at the four arms and which in a premonitory way anticipated the near future: "The River will run with blood, a prince will go into exile and the kingdom will be plunged into distress."

A short distance farther on towards the Royal Palace, we can discover the Chaktomuk Conference Hall. It is another work by Vann Molyvann which was inaugurated in 1961 and remains to date almost intact. We can notice several features of traditional Khmer architecture, such as the pointed roofs and the free space under the building which gives the impression it is floating. The building was financed by the United States, and Vann Molyvann recalled an anecdote about the American inspectors' behavior:



Chaktomuk Conference Hall

“[They] criticized the fact that North Korean cement was being used. The Americans couldn’t accept this.” His wife added, “We couldn’t even drink tea as the sugar came from Cuba and the tea from India.” Once completed, the hall became the setting of important events such as the 6th International Buddhist Conference in 1961. In 1979, the trial by default of the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea (The Khmer Rouge regime) took place here. Today the hall has been privatized and well restored, even if disgruntled people may lament the now pink color instead of the former white one.

We’ll leave the SRN with a last little detail. Just after the Conference Hall, take a look on your left at the building of the National Committee for Organizing National and International Festivals and more precisely at the big medallion of an indefinable color, between blue and grey-green. This venerable plaque was affixed here in the early 1980s. On the plaque the date December 2, 1978, is the founding date of the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation, generally designated by its French acronym FUNSK, and its name in Khmer is in the semicircle under the characters. FUNSK



FUNSK medallion

was an opportune creation to legitimize the Vietnamese troops forcing their way into Cambodia on December 25, 1978, the overthrowing of the Pol Pot regime and the creation of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) on January 20, 1979. The central part of the medallion portrays six characters who symbolize PRK social diversity: the monk, the worker, the intellectual, the peasant couple and the soldier. This varied social representation and the diversity of clothes do not lapse at all into extravagance: the characters' poses are full of inflexibility and determination. This variety allows killing two birds with one stone: on the one hand it is a direct criticism of the Khmer Rouge regime which suppressed any social diversity at all, let alone any diversity about clothes, and on the other hand it strengthens the theme of unity which was the Front's *raison d'être*.

This series of strolls in the SRN Phnom Penh emphasizes the great architectural development of Cambodia during the 1960s. It is also a plea for the preservation of monuments that can still be saved and restored. They give to Phnom Penh an architectural character unique in Southeast Asia. Moreover, they are for the present and future generations of Cambodians the perfect example of faultless practicality combined with architectural elegance.

To be continued: a temporary conclusion

The structure of today's Phnom Penh was conceived and designed in the time of the French Protectorate and the Sangkum Reastr Niyum. The regimes which followed did not greatly modify the general design of Phnom Penh but were content to fill in the empty spaces with constructions of doubtful taste.

The beginning of the end

The second Indochinese conflict did not spare Cambodia. The main result of March 20, 1970, coup and the dismissal of Prince Sihanouk was that the country was immersed in total warfare.

Phnom Penh became the capital of a new regime, the Khmer Republic, which is also often dubbed "Lon Nol's regime." The short existence of this regime (March 1970-April 1975) soon depended only on American support. During the five years of the republic, life in Phnom Penh became the life of a besieged city. Phnom Penh was first provided with fresh supplies by way of the Mekong River till the fall of Neak Loeung, then by air until the shelling of Pochentong Airport cut the city from the rest of the world. In 1975, because of the influx of refugees, the population of Phnom Penh reached almost 3,000,000 inhabitants.

The Khmer Republic did not leave any architectural remains except the bunker Lon Nol had built in Chamkar Mon and various buildings in the Tuol Kok district, the development of which followed a plan designed in the time of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum. An important fact is that most of the great architects who had worked at the time of the SRN such as Vann Molyvann and Lu Ban Hap had left the country.

An evocation of the Republic's heroic deeds requires a stroll in the so-called "Catholic Village" (Phum catholic) to the north of Chroy Changvar Bridge. It is the place where the slaughter of 1970 began: The republican army killed innocent Vietnamese civilians accusing them of being Vietcong agents. The killings only stopped because international protests were

increasing in scale and because of the intervention of the United States which had to watch over the public image of their new ally. But the image of the Khmer Republic would be forever stained.

The year zero

On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh. Two days later the entire population of the city was evacuated in atrocious conditions without consideration of the age or health of the people. A first and very striking description of the evacuation of Phnom Penh is by Father François Ponchaud in his book *Cambodia Year Zero*.

All the foreigners gathered in the French Embassy and were finally evacuated on April 30. Phnom Penh was from then on a ghost town. Apart



Khmer Rouge leadership following the fall of Phnom Penh. From the left : Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Son Sen

from high ranking Khmer Rouge leaders, there only remained a few thousand technicians in charge of technical services. Exact figures of the population of Phnom Penh from 1975 to 1979 are still unconfirmed; on the basis of a 1978 Yugoslav television report, the figure of 20,000 has been put forward.



Phnom Penh emptied of its inhabitants, April 19, 1975

Even if a number of buildings were destroyed, there was no systematic policy of eradication of the symbols of the past. As soon as April 18, the National Bank, symbol of capitalism, was blown up with dynamite. The destruction of the reinforced concrete cathedral required much more effort, and Khmers called back from France by Ieng Sary were employed for that task. Churches were razed, with the exception of the Providence Church. On the other hand, pagodas and the Royal Palace, symbols of the feudal oppression denounced relentlessly by the Khmer Rouge, were spared, as were the National Museum and the National Library.

It is difficult to see premeditation or some kind of logic in this destruction. We are more prone to analyze it as sporadic action depending on local

commanders' moods. As an example, the Hakka Chinese temple near the old market was destroyed whereas most of the other Chinese temples were left intact.

In any case, what was essential for the new regime was to empty the town of its population. Most of the city's districts were left in a neglected state. At the same time, some parts of the town were looked after and were shown to the few foreign visitors. According to the demographer Marek Sliwinsky (1995), a Chinese diplomat who had already worked in other communist countries' capitals said that he had never had such a feeling of oppression as in Phnom Penh during those years.

Phnom Penh sheltered the sadly notorious S21 where from 1975 to 1978 more than 15,000 people were interrogated; less than a dozen survived.

There are few accounts of life in the capital of Democratic Kampuchea. Prince Sihanouk was back in Cambodia in September 1975 and described his life within four walls in the royal palace in a book entitled "Prisoner of the Khmer Rouge". In March 1978, a Yugoslav television team made a film about Cambodia. At that time the regime attempted a late and slight policy of openness, and a very important report was Elisabeth Becker's who was among the few non-sympathizers invited by the regime. She wrote an account of her impressions of Phnom Penh in "When the War Was Over".

This listing would be incomplete without the mention of Laurence Picq's "Beyond the Horizon: Five Years with the Khmer Rouge" (1989). The book is about the life of a young French lady in Khmer Rouge Cambodia. Married to a high ranking Khmer rouge official, Laurence Picq worked from 1975 to 1979 for Democratic Kampuchea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and wrote a striking description of the regime and of life in Phnom Penh in those years.

Rebirth of a town

The Vietnamese army seized upon Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979, and ousted the Khmer Rouge regime. The first pictures and a film shot by an East German team give an impression of unreality and absurdity: totally deserted streets, a Central Market around which coconut trees have been planted, burnt out cars strewn along the streets...

Very soon people started gathering on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, and solutions had to be found for the problem of supplying the city with food. As the administration also had to be reconstituted, former officials who remained alive had to be convinced to collaborate with the new authorities. Three week training sessions were organized for the future state employees who, in turn, recruited others. In 1979 - 1980, a civil servant's wage was 16 kilos of rice plus a ration of salt and sugar.

The repopulating of the Phnom Penh was first subject to control, but this would soon be given up by the authorities because of strong pressure by the population squatting at the entrances of the city. In the end, people settled where they could and how they could, the only rule being immediate survival. The first census in 1980 gives a population of 90,000 people.

Education was not the least of the problems. The great majority of children old enough to be sent to school did not have access to education during the civil war. As far as the Khmer Rouge regime was concerned, it purely and simply banned any kind of teaching, apart from its indoctrination sessions. Teaching began again as early as 1979, but in a situation of utter destitution. In the former schools which could still be used, but also in the streets, civil servants and teachers who had survived the Khmer Rouge showed an exceptional devotion by teaching even at night.

Streets had to be cleaned up, and the civil servants requisitioned to do this task would enjoy their first weekends off only starting in 1986.

Trade slowly resumed, first under the form of bartering until the restoration of the riel currency in 1981. Petty trade was a private activity, contrary to bigger trade, particularly in the market places, which would remain under state control until it was privatized in 1989.

In 1989 the population of the town was estimated at 500,000. The new population of Phnom Penh gave the town an image which has lasted till now. The majority of that population came from the countryside and was completely ignorant of city habits. Even today, probably not more than 10% of the city's adult population is of Phnom Penh origin.

The results of this peopling are still visible and give to Phnom Penh housing its uniquely unfortunate character. A good example of this "reorganization" is Doctor Bessière's clinic located at the corner of Khemarak Phoumin Street and Norodom Boulevard. This famous private clinic of the time of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum is now divided into a multitude of makeshift shelters; some families have even built plywood partitions in the entrance hall or in the stairwell. The plywood "houses" which divide the





Phnom Penh, January 1979

Providence Church near Chroy Changvar Bridge are also a good example of that post- 1979 trend.

The Paris Agreements and UNTAC

Signed in October 1991, the Paris Agreements would lead to the setting up of the United Nations Transitory Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC), in charge of organizing free elections. This period, called in Khmer the “UNTAC period,” would last in people’s memories for a long time. We should have no difficulty imagining the effect the arrival in Cambodia of the 30,000 United Nations members would produce on a population which till then had been deprived of almost everything. This intervention would also have pernicious effects on Phnom Penh life: dollarization of the economy, rising prices...

The return to peace and the permission to move freely in the country would provoke an influx to the city of impoverished Cambodians, and by 1996 the population of Phnom Penh was over one million.

What’s next?

According to the results of the 2008 census, Phnom Penh has a population of 1,325,681 people. It is difficult to supply data about the ethnic composition of this population. The relatively clear pre-1975 limits between Khmer and Chinese have become less marked, not to mention the current Vietnamese population, about which there is plenty of contradictory data.

The stroller will notice the difficulties today of separating certain public and private spaces, for example the sidewalks. The emergence of the notion of patrimony will not happen in a day, and harmony and style are still surreal concepts: we can thus be shocked by corrugated iron roofs scattered in Unnalom Pagoda.

Since 2004, Phnom Penh and the whole country have been a place of speculative madness. The results can be very clearly seen: the destruction of an appreciable part of the patrimony and an anarchic building policy.

The style which is currently in the fore and that Phnom Penh will hand down to future generations can be defined as Chinese-Thai baroque. Even

if it hasn't been analyzed in a consistent way, this aesthetic can be defined by the way it combines very loud colors with pudgy cherubs, columns preferably Corinthian, and indispensable gold decoration. Much in evidence in Thailand, Vietnam, and China, malicious gossip has described this style as "nouveau riche." Elsewhere that might be of little consequence, but in a city which has been a place of avant-garde architecture, it sets off alarm bells.

These last years, the pace of destruction has increased to the point that even buildings which were supposed to be protected have been razed to the ground. One of the saddest examples of this policy is the former Phnom Penh tourist office. Located on Sisowath Quay opposite Unnalom Pagoda, it was one of the most beautiful houses of Phnom Penh. The house had even been the subject of a published study which detailed its characteristics and described its future functions. Nonetheless, bulldozers started their action at night following a mysterious property swap. The result is an empty lot surrounded by the standard blue metal wall around sites waiting for development.

For the future, let us express the hope that the authorities will realize the exceptional interest and attraction of Phnom Penh, and that efficient measures of protection will be taken.

Index

Étienne Aymonier (1844 - 1929): He began his career as a soldier and became afterwards a high ranking colonial civil servant and Resident Superior. He published several works about Cambodia and the Chams.

Xavier Brau de Saint Pol Lias (1840 - 1914): After a career at the Banque de France, he was in charge of the Geographical society from 1873, then of the Colonial Studies Society and the Commercial Geographic Society. He led various far eastern expeditions and visited Cambodia in 1885. He became a fervent advocate of the colonial system.

Doudart de Lagrée (1823 - 1868): In 1862, he left for Cochinchina and on July 5, 1863, he concluded the French protectorate treaty over Cambodia. Doudart de Lagrée came back to France in 1864 and left again as a navy captain in 1866 to lead a scientific expedition on the Mekong River with Commander Francis Garnier as the second in command. Among other accomplishments, he explored the site of Angkor but died in China before the expedition ended.

George Groslier (1887 - 1945): Painter, archeologist, ethnologist, novelist and photographer. He designed and built the Albert Sarraut museum (now the National Museum) from 1917 to 1920 and became its first curator. He was born and spent most of his life in Cambodia. He died in 1945 after being interrogated and tortured by the Japanese.

Huyn de Verneville: Resident Superior in Cambodia from 1889 to 1897.

Jean-Claude Miche (1805 - 1873): Bishop and diplomat whose advice about South East Asia was greatly valued, he lent his support to the Governor of Cochinchina, particularly in preparing the protectorate treaty over Cambodia.

Alexandre Henri Mouhot (1826 - 1861) : Between 1858 et 1861, he organized three expeditions and travelled up and down Siam, Laos and Cambodia where he “discovered” the ruins of Angkor in November 1859.

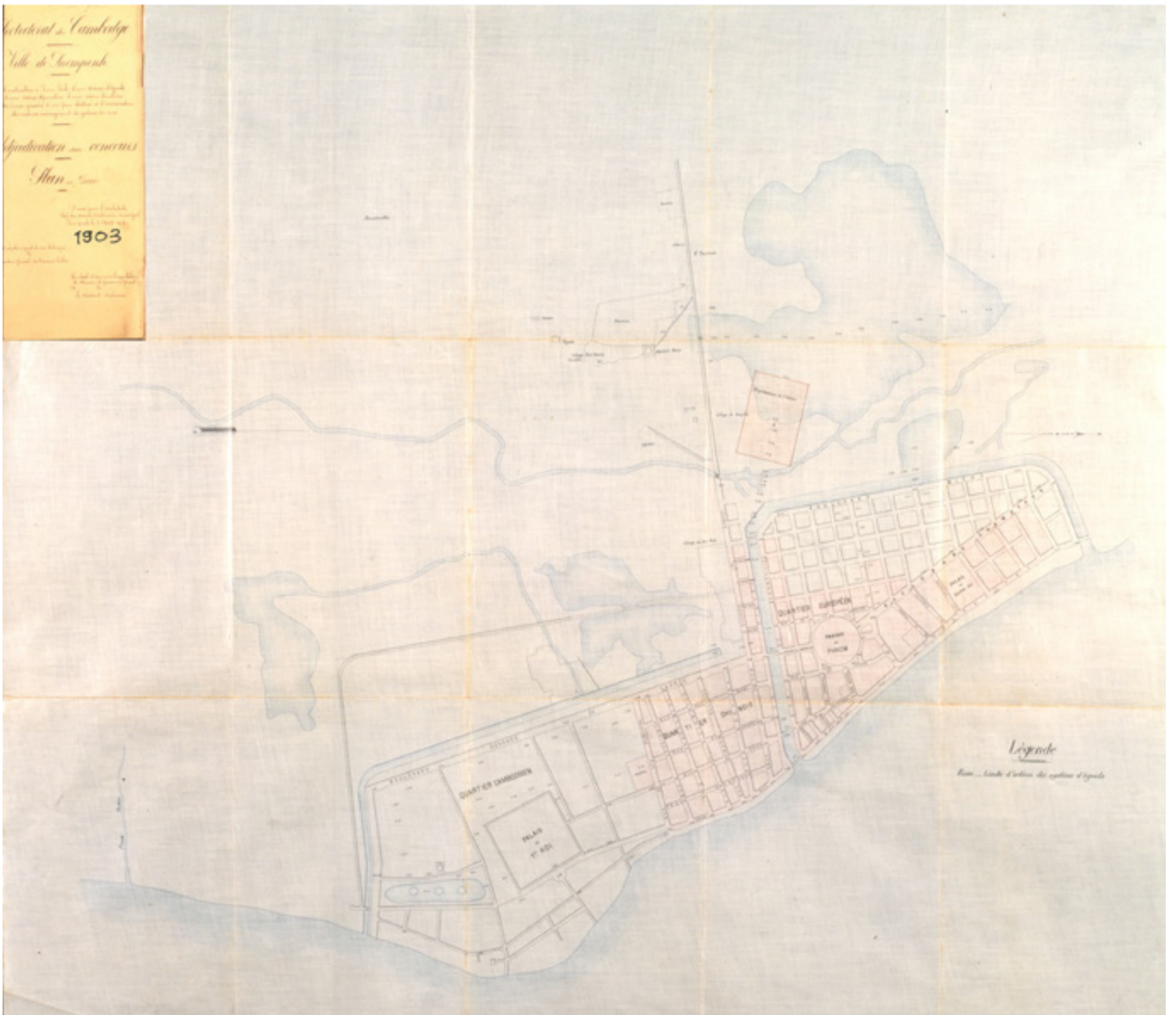
Norodom I (1834 - 1904): King of Cambodia from 1860 to 1904, great-grandfather of Norodom Sihanouk.

Sisowath (1840 - 1927): King of Cambodia from 1904 to his death. He was King Ang Duong's son and King Norodom I's half-brother.

Charles Thomson: Governor of Cochinchina from 1882 to 1885

Appendix

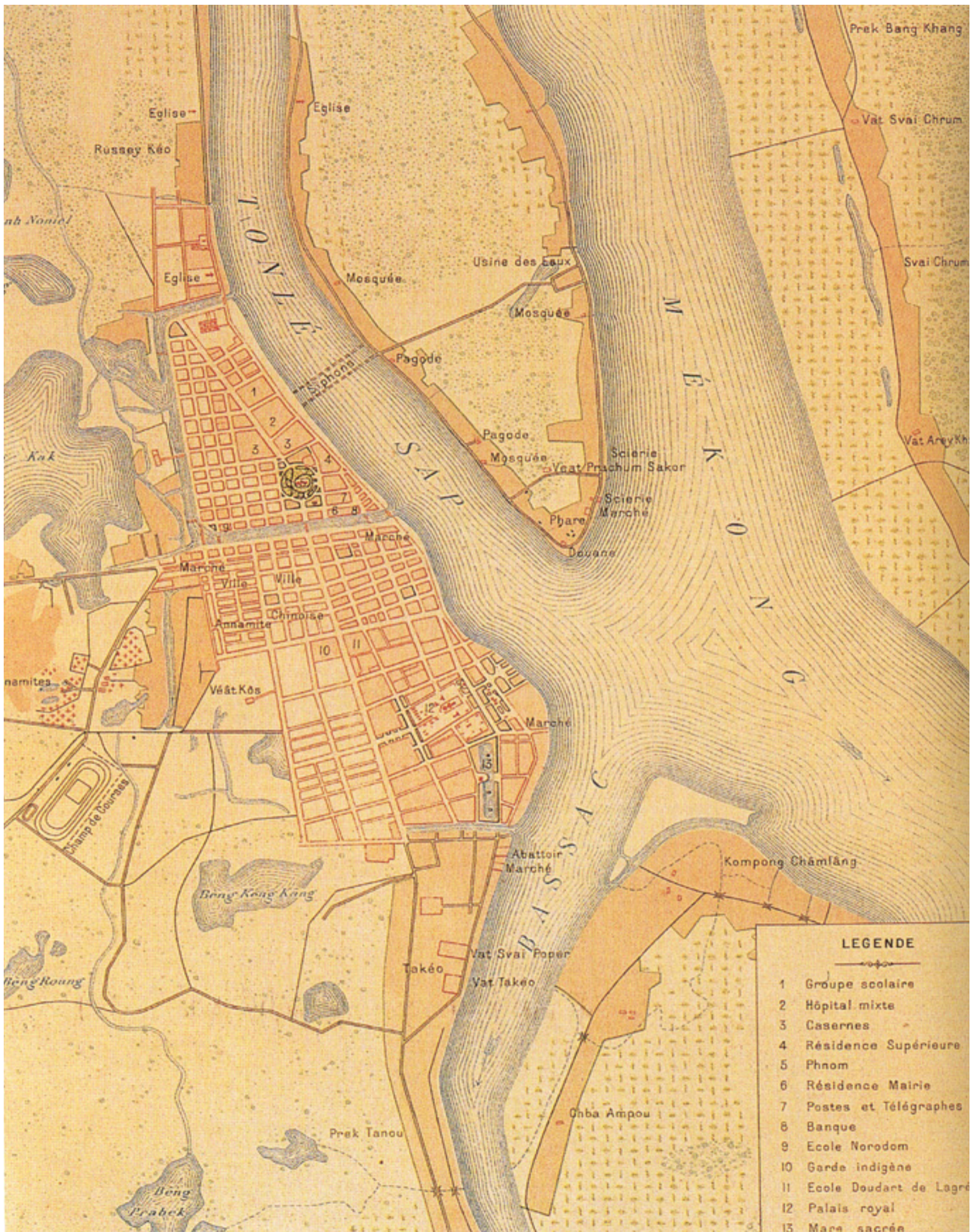
Phnom Penh in the time of the French Protectorate



Phnom Penh 1903



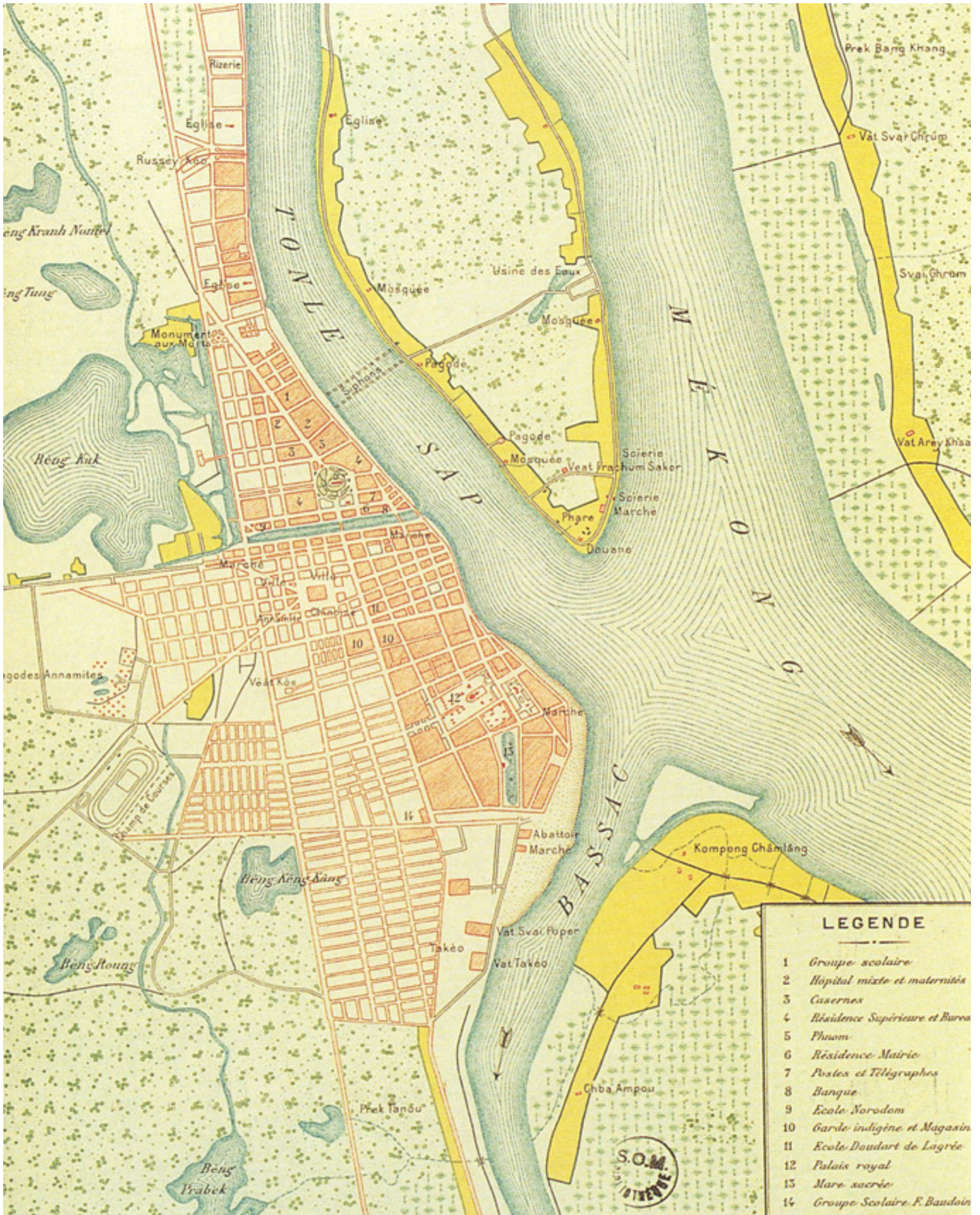
Phnom Penh 1914



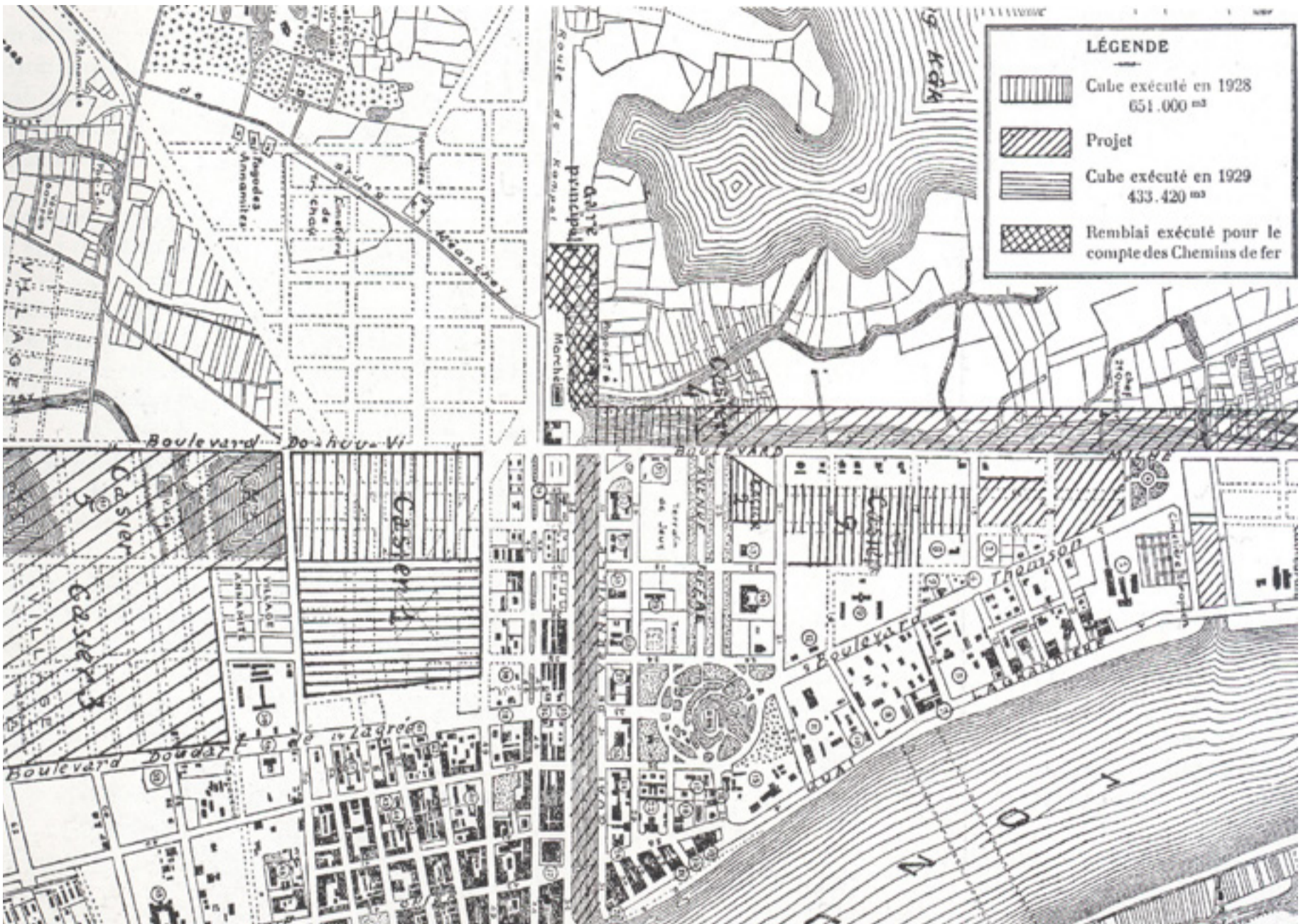
Phnom Penh 1920



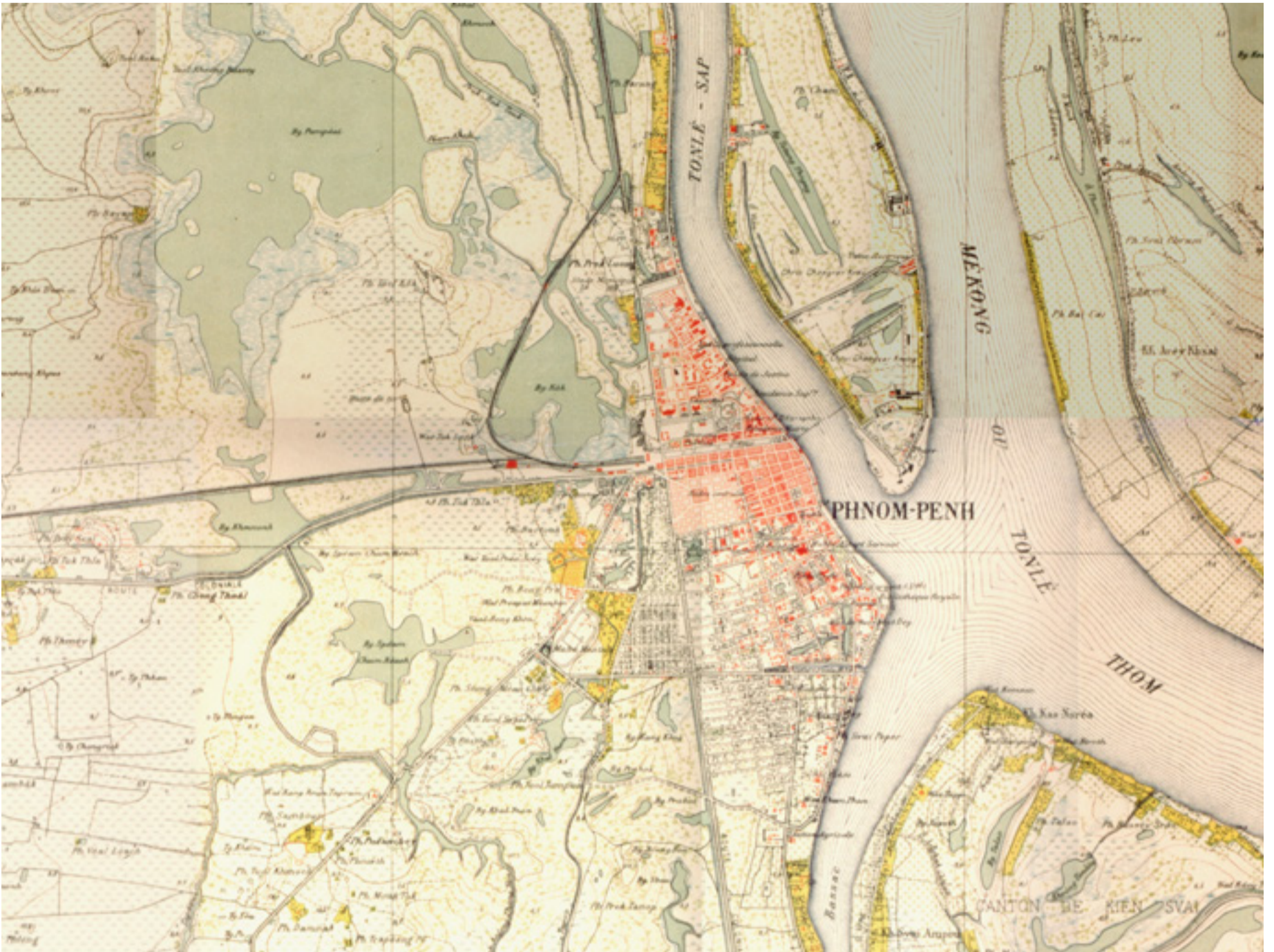
Phnom Penh 1922



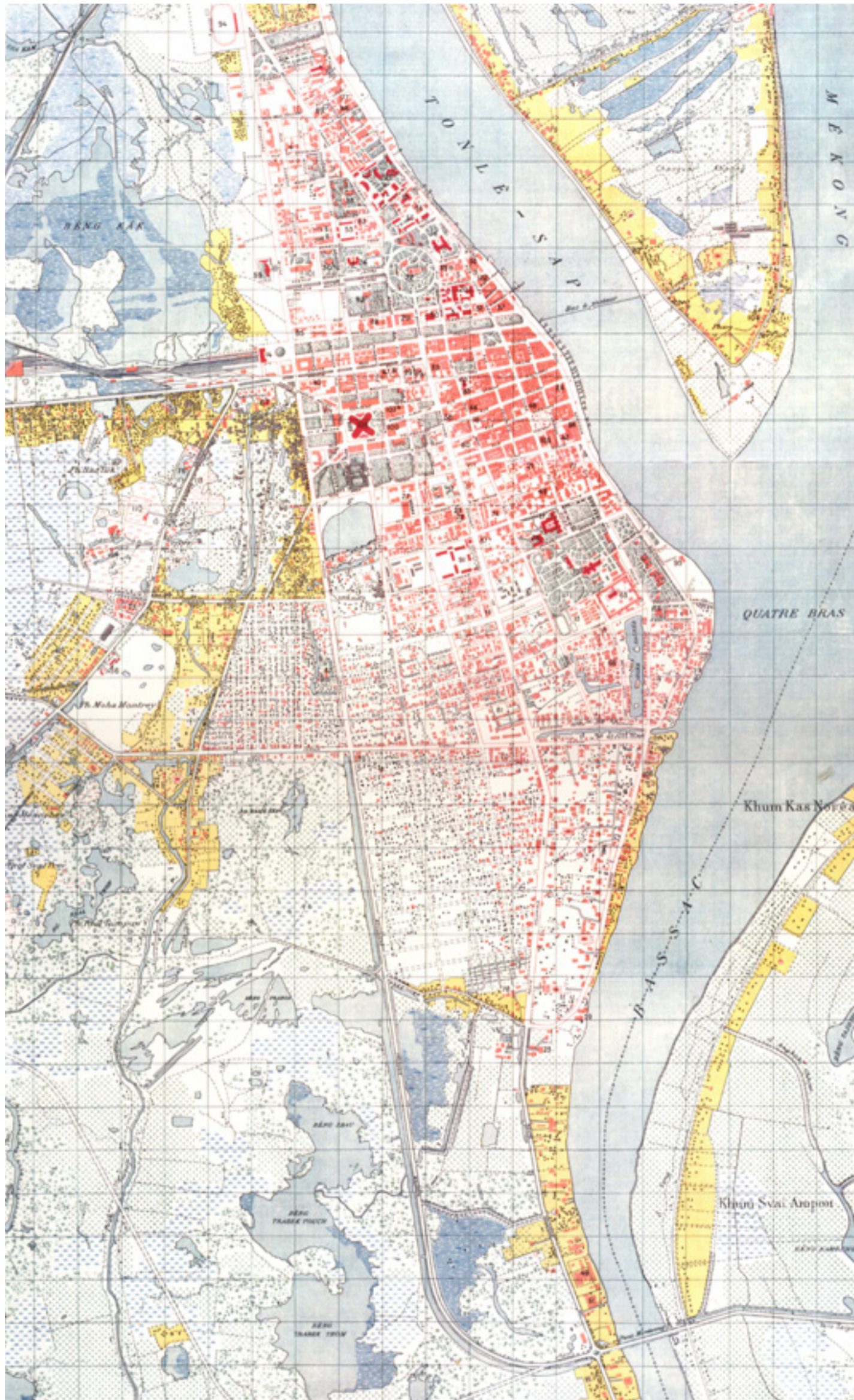
Phnom Penh 1925



Phnom Penh 1927



Phnom Penh 1930



Phnom Penh 1937

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Strolling

around Phnom Penh

Since Phnom Penh is conspicuous in its absence of tourist guidebooks and visitors usually spend about two days to see Wat Phnom, the Royal Palace, the National Museum and the Tuol Slaeng (S 21) Museum, the need for a new much richer way of glimpsing history was recognized and has been created. This book was written to offer a striking alternative: seven strolls through time and space, in the rich, colorful and dramatic history of Phnom Penh where history, anthropology, politics and anecdotes come together with rich glimpse into the past.



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