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Wat Damnak, Siem Reap-Angkor: conserving built heritage in a Cambodian Buddhist monastery

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Although extensive work has been done on Khmer monumental architecture, the field of vernacular architecture has not received the same attention. Few studies or projects have dealt with this significant part of Cambodian heritage and little emphasis has been so far placed on the need to preserve old built structures. At the government level, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts’s recent attempt of developing a policy regarding Khmer cultural heritage and extending its scope to intangible heritage incorporating performing arts and craftsmanship is a significant step forward. But future plans should also include vernacular heritage.

For beyond the materiality of this heritage, there is a whole world of beliefs, rituals and oral traditions that Cambodians have been respecting for centuries and which is now slowly vanishing. This old built heritage also represents a high level of expertise from carpenters, artists and master builders that were in charge of the construction and the ornamentation. However the transmission of these traditions and the sense of continuity which would help sustain them have been seriously disrupted following a series of major historic tragedies and strong socioeconomic changes. Owing to these disruptions, a general widespread belief has emerged in Cambodia which takes for granted that what is old but not reflecting the magnificence of Angkor temples is of little cultural significance. But such a belief has its roots largely growing from ignorance and not so much from disregard.¹

In presenting a conservation project carried out in a Buddhist monastery in Siem Reap-Angkor, this paper attempts to make the case for initiatives that help restore that sense of continuity and contribute to the preservation of higher learning institutions in both ways, tangible and intangible.

The objective of this project was to convert two old abandoned buildings used formerly for educational purposes into state-of-the-art facilities for a research center. After ten months of work, the project was successfully completed in January 2001. The Center’s facilities were inaugurated for the opening of a Conference on Khmer Studies in presence of HRH Princess Bopha Devi, Minister of Culture. As the Center is free and open to everyone, the past three years have seen a growing number of visitors ranging from the pupils of the neighbouring schools to young Cambodian or foreign scholars as well as tourists.

Wat Damnak, a living monastery perpetuating the tradition of monasteries as centres of higher learning

Legend credits King Ponha Yat² with the foundation of Wat Damnak, the Buddhist monastery where the conservation project was undertaken. Wat Damnak, the ‘Monastery of the Royal Residence’, is said to have provided lodging for the kings when they used to disembark from the Tonle Sap on their way to Angkor Thom. Such a legend explains the strong historic and cultural significance that the monastery embodies for the Siem Reap community.

But despite its former royal patronage, Wat Damnak is like any other monastery in Cambodia: it is a place traditionally devoted to education and Buddhist studies.³ In line with this tradition, the Center for Khmer Studies’ founders felt the importance of perpetuating this tradition that had been completely wiped out during the Pol Pot period.⁴ It was particularly significant in the case of Wat Damnak as the buildings due for renovation had been used as teaching venues, with one being a former Pali language school. Negotiations with the Pagoda’s committee of laymen, the achars, led to an agreement whereby the Center after carrying out the renovation of the two buildings would have full use of them. An annual donation would also be given to the Monastery.

During the planning and development stages of the renovation project, regular meetings with the committee were crucial. The achars committee is still one of the strongest social structures in the village and probably the most respected. It can call the local community for mobilization through which important decisions will be announced. Given this social context where achars and elder people are the legitimate source of knowledge, the renovation project was very careful in following its advice. Major decisions were always taken upon agreement between both parties.

Their enthusiasm for the renovation project and more generally for the Center’s initiative was clearly instrumental in the success the project has experienced with the local community. In line with this initiative, the renovation of the Monastery’s library was decided by the Committee a few months later and the building which had been accommodating several monks for some years was refurbished in its initial function. With the Center’s assistance and following a book donation, the monks undertook the cataloguing of the collection. Wat Damnak is probably now the only monastery in Cambodia with two libraries, with their collections complementing each other (the Center’s library specialises in Southeast Asia studies while the Monastery’s library specialises in Buddhist Studies).

Wat Damnak, a laboratory of architectures

Wat Damnak is a large compound with buildings located in a vast park and enhanced by a large pond in the middle of which a pavilion was built. In compliance with the traditional layout of temples in Theravada Buddhism, the ridges of the buildings are oriented East-West, with the vihara or prayer hall as the prominent building which divides the compound into two areas, living spaces for monks to the North and teaching spaces to the South.

If the foundation of the monastery may date back to the fifteenth century as mentioned earlier, the existing buildings are
quite recent. The vihara dates indeed from the late 1910s and all other structures have been erected afterwards. Alongside the Khmer-style superimposed roof and colonial arcades, the vihara has some beautiful gilded wooden carved panels featuring scenes of the Reamker, the Khmer local version of the Ramayana. To some extent, Wat Oamnak represents a laboratory of architectural creation as its grounds have seen the construction of several buildings, each of them being an attempt of a blend between Khmer and colonial architectures. Besides their restoration activities in Angkor temples, the French conservators at the Ecole Française d’Extrem Orient were commissioned by the colonial administration to improve the health and education infrastructures of Siem Reap. Assisted by Cambodian draughtsmen, they designed facilities like hospitals, schools for the local and the French communities. In Wat Damnak, no less than three school buildings were improved during the Protectorate.

In contrast with the Conference Hall, the building nearby (built in 1941-1942 according to the achars), which was renovated as the Center’s Library, is an attempt by Maurice Glaize, former Conservateur of Angkor to contextualize its design in terms of local climatic constraints and ornaments. Yet, this building may appear closer to a pastiche architecture than an example of the Style indochinois that Ernest Hebrard and other French architects attempted to formalize in the late 1920s with an emphasis on local building techniques, and not so much on artistic references. Indeed the design of the building owes a lot from its borrowings of Khmer traditional architecture. A massive pediment with Khmer style carvings is the prominent feature of the building. Additional references to Khmer monumental architecture include a cornice ornamented with repetitive...
motifs representing a praying Buddha surrounded by foliage and dvarapala figures, the traditional Khmer temple guardians which are posted on each side of the Library entrance.

Finally fluted columns with a similar design as the ones used in the temples were also incorporated for the balustrade and the roof was built with two gables, a reference to Khmer vernacular architecture. This type of roof was very popular among the French architects in the colonial times and is a direct borrowing of dvarapala style house which can be still seen today in Cambodia's countryside. Not limited only to references to Khmer traditional architecture, the design of the building demonstrates as well sensitivity to local climate conditions with two outdoor galleries on the Northern and Southern sides of the building which are a relevant response against rainfall and direct sunshine.

Renovation work on this very derelict building, which had received no maintenance since the Khmer Rouge period and was said to be haunted, started on February 2000 with a celebration and a Buddhist blessing from the monks of Wat Damnak and was completed within six months. Due to pressure from the roof structure and ground subsidence related to the presence of termites, the leaning eastern part of the building was removed and reconstructed identically. A protection film was laid under the new floor slab with a preventive anti-termite treatment which had been previously spread in the building base. A new brick wall with a transfer beam was erected by the western gable to support loads of the roof structure and to balance the leaning wall. Compacting the ground floor and installing a concrete slab (in replacement of a thin slab of mortar and sand underneath) were other major works.

Serving as a public library, the rooms were furnished with bookshelves and reading tables, locally produced. The library now provides room for 20 readers. For academic research, a room is reserved to scholars who can access precious books carefully stored in glazed shelves. Another room at the other end of the building serves as a cataloguing and service room for the Library staff. Holding a collection of over 3000 references, the Center's library is now the largest research library outside the capital city, Phnom Penh.

In line with the building design, which blends Khmer and colonial references, a large mural painted in the early 1940s at the time of construction shows how artists at that time were inspired by various influences and attempted to create a new style of painting. Located in the Library's reading room, the mural features the tree under which Buddha experienced enlightenment. With devatas (traditional celestial figures) grace the scene with their presence, Buddha meditates in a pristine and peaceful forest where deer, rabbits and other animals wander near a river. Buddha is not represented on the mural but a Buddha figure is placed on a pedestal in front of the mural.

If the mural presents specific Buddhist themes, the painting techniques used to depict them introduce a classic European style perspective featured with two focal points. Although the mural was not painted by artists as skilled and famous as the ones who realized the wall-paintings in Wat Bo, a neighbouring monastery in Siem Reap, it was considered worthy of preservation, especially at a time where old pagodas are being pulled down and replaced by new ones built with standardized design guidelines.

Unfortunately, during the Khmer Rouge period, the mural was seriously damaged. Besides the ravages of time, the Khmer Rouge had systematically shot heads off animals. For the maintenance of the mural, the assistance of a conservation team, GACP, the German Conservation Apsara project, currently working to protect the decaying Apsara figures at Angkor Wat, was of great help. In early 2001, a survey of the mural was undertaken to identify the composition of the pigments and clean it up from dust. It was then decided that the mural would be kept with the bullet holes as a testimony of the Khmer Rouge times.

Finally, an important step in the renovation process was the colour of the coat that the buildings would be painted with. Upon agreement with the committee of laymen, a dark red coating was applied on the outside walls of the Center's buildings. Such a choice is in contrast with the previous egg colour that was used for the buildings. Red in itself does not have any symbolic meaning as in Vietnam, where the colour was reserved for royalty in former times. In Cambodia, this is a colour, which has been rarely applied and used for two important buildings in Phnom Penh: the National Museum and the Royal University of Fine Arts, both buildings devoted to higher education and knowledge transmission. So it was important that the Center's future facilities be associated in people's mind to these institutions famous all over Cambodia and that the sense of continuity be obvious not only throughout time (with continuity of use) but also throughout space.

Specific to another trend of the late French colonial architecture in its attempt to blend Khmer art references and new European styles en vogue like Art Deco, a third building, the monks' library, was built in the mid-1940s. In a pleasant design, Khmer-style fluted columns within window frames and art-deco mouldings have been integrated into this structure whose proportions and scale are the finest among the buildings of the compound.

Beyond the objective of architectural preservation, the renovation of these old buildings served an educational purpose as well. In many ways, the cluster of architectures at Wat Damnak is a palimpsest in which major events of the past century of Cambodian history have been embedded. The deliberate decision to keep testimonies of the Khmer rouge period, of the Library as a former Pali school,6 and the overall renovation, restrained albeit respectful, of these past architectural endeavors were to prove that a sense of continuity can be promoted with limited means.

In the near future, the renovation of the prayer hall for which the laymen have been seeking assistance and the re-landscaping

Figure 4 Wat Damnak, interior of the library. (F. Tartunier)
of the park will be undertaken thanks to a generous donor. The whole project will be devised as a field training workshop for architect students in preservation techniques for vernacular architecture, and will illustrate in the most relevant way the mission the Center for Khmer Studies attempts to achieve, the promotion of Khmer Studies not limited only to Angkor temples studies and the training of a new generation of Cambodian scholars and experts.

Endnotes

1 If ignorance is widespread, it is not shared by the whole Cambodian community. An on-going survey focusing on old wooden built structures (pagodas and houses) in three Cambodian provinces and undertaken by the Center for Khmer Studies underlines that local communities and families living in and around these old buildings take great pride in them. The derelict condition in which these buildings are unfortunately kept has more to do with a lack of financial means and expertise. For further information, see the Center's website, www.khmersstudies.org

2 According to the chronicles of Cambodia, Ponha Yat was the last Khmer king of the Angkorean period, before the capture of Angkor in 1431 by the Siamese.

3 Besides the religious teaching provided for the monks, Buddhist monasteries in Cambodia accommodate primary schools which the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports is responsible for. In Wat Damnak, there is a group of seven primary schools gathering more than 700 pupils.

4 Most of Cambodian monasteries during that time were turned into rice mills, hospitals, etc. and education provided by the regime consisted of basic schooling in factories and co-operatives within the ideological development of agrarian social values.

5 Buildings were at that time simply laid on the ground, with no foundations for the stability of the structure.

6 Besides the damages to the mural, noted above, we have to refer as well to brick foundations of a former wooden structure located between the Library and the Conference Hall and burnt down by the Khmer Rouge. These foundations were kept untouched, as well as the sign in Khmer referring to the building as a former Pali-language school.

Figure 5 Wat Damnak, prayer hall. (F. Teinturier)