

MOVING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT: A SIEM REAP-ANGKOR KHMER RESIDENCE

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In my 60th year (61st by the Khmer calendar) - an auspicious one as it turned out - I decided in 2007 to move from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap. I had been extremely fortunate in the Cambodian capital, residing since 1994 in what is now known as 'The Chinese House' built by Tan Bunpa (1871-1952). This is a 1905 Sino-Khmer brick residence facing the Tonle Sap river, approximately 1.5km north of Wat Phnom. A new life has commenced for this building that now houses a 'decadent Indochinese bar' upstairs, with the ground floor space alternating as performance space or art gallery.

The sale of this property hastened my decision to move from Phnom Penh. I needed to find a house in Siem Reap but had not yet decided on what or where it should be.

ENTER THE ARCHITECT

Graduate architect Hok Sokol had been our associate research assistant on a co-authored book, *Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture' 1953-1970*, published in 2006. Our conversations had sometimes focused on exemplary 1960s concrete forms and modernist design that referenced traditional Khmer structures in wood. I once remarked "... that one day, I wished to live in a traditional wooden house." He remembered this snippet of conversation.

Sokol was then a member of a Centre for Khmer Studies documentation team that had visited several provinces to record wooden heritage, both extant and at risk. While visiting Kompong Cham province, the team recorded what was to become my future house. Years later, the family who owned the house proposed demolishing it, as its elderly occupant could no longer negotiate the stairs, and contacted Sokol, asking if he knew of anyone who wanted to purchase the building.

I vividly remember my first visit to the house and meeting its owners. In hindsight, given the challenges that lay ahead, this resulted in a somewhat impulsive decision to preserve what was clearly a masterwork by relocating the entire house to Siem Reap. Handwritten, thumb-printed contract papers were drawn up that very day.

It took a total of 11 months to disassemble the wooden building, transport it from its location on a small island in Kompong Cham and

FAÇADE OF HOUSE, LIT AT EARLY EVENING: PHOTO: JOHN GOLLINGS



reconstruct it in Siem Reap. The traditional structure of the house, held together by wooden wedges and pins, allowed it to be literally pulled apart. Taking advantage of the heightened level of the Mekong in the rainy season, the pieces were transported piece by piece in multiple moves, initially by small local canoes through canals to the edge of the island, then by larger river ferries to Kompong Cham provincial town. From there, a large truck and trailer was used to transport the entire load to Siem Reap, with smaller trucks and then hand carts needed on the final stretch to haul the wood over the narrow lanes leading to the house's new site.

A team of some ten carpenters under the supervision of Sokol accomplished this move of some 30 tonnes of wood over a distance of 315km. It is to all these people that I owe the house as it stands today in Siem Reap. The house is now located in secluded Wat Damnak village, to the south of a Buddhist monastery. It rests nearby the Siem Reap River, on the opposite side to the Old Market that today features a series of colonial shop-houses bustling with cafes and tourist facilities.

MASTERPIECE IN WOOD

Interviews with the Kompong Cham family revealed that Lon, the original owner of the house, was a timber merchant who traded on the Mekong River from Kompong Thom

and Kompong Cham to Kampuchea Krom (the Mekong delta region). This perhaps accounts for the superb quality and variety of Cambodian timbers used in this house and its excellent state of preservation despite years of neglect and occasional seasonal flooding of the island.

Grandfather Lon's 'rong dol' style residence dates to c.1915 and employs five varieties of Cambodian hardwood. It took some five years to choose and collect the wood to construct the original house. The term 'rong dol': "... seems to derive from the expression 'ron phdon tol' meaning 'house whose roof plates expand', subsequently shortened to 'ron tol'. This construction style, now quite rare in Cambodia, results in a long protruding roof or awning that extends from the house onto the verandah. (Tainturier, 2006:78-80).

The house is supported by large columns, decorated and lacquered by hand. Its interior is richly decorated with intricately carved panels and woodwork. Both the screen inside the house and the outside window shutters and doors are carved with flower and fruit motifs, while fretwork runs around the entire building, letting in the breezes from the large terrace.

Some concessions to modern requirements have been made while reconstructing the house. A reinforced concrete foundation over

crushed stones was laid down before erecting the house on its new stilts, to support the weight of the new clay roof tiles and raise the structure above flood level. A concrete base, 20cm thick, was poured to create a patio underneath the building, a cool place of retreat when the weather gets really hot. A new wing, also on stilts, has been built to replace a similar structure serving as a kitchen in the original house, which had collapsed and could not be moved. In addition to the kitchen, the new wing houses modern facilities such as a number of internal bathrooms.

A TRADITION CONTINUED

Traditional wooden architecture represents a significant part of Cambodia's cultural heritage and deserves recognition and protection. For contemporary Cambodians, however, the ideal home is seated firmly on the ground, built of bricks and mortar, glazed and air-conditioned. Village life is rapidly modernising, with the mass media touting an 'everything new is best' mentality attuned to the latest mobile, motorcycle and fashion accessories.

Wooden houses require constant maintenance and are considered old-fashioned and 'country-style', the very antithesis of a significant sector of the population's housing and lifestyle aspirations. These properties are falling into disrepair and being abandoned, with the young increasingly gravitating to city life. Ageing and often ailing family members are unable to care for this wooden heritage. Remote locations and small villages that have in the past protected these treasures are neither able nor willing to preserve them. The Cambodian government has no heritage policy related to wooden structures.

In practical terms, there are several alternatives for family owners of extant traditional wooden houses: continue to live in and repair deteriorating structures; demolish and sell for wood value alone; sell decorative salvaged sections to dealers and use the rest for firewood; de-construct, move and re-construct part or whole of the structure to a different location; or, leave *in situ* to nature and the elements until total collapse. Unfortunately it is the land, rather than the house that is of greatest

value and the situation can be complicated by difficulties in resolving title when houses are transferred to several successors.

Early last year, application was made for the 2009 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for this 'Rong Dol-style Wooden Khmer Residence, Wat Damnak Village, Siem Reap, Cambodia'. Although the announcement of the awards in September did not include the house, the Jury: "...noted that the project reflects a noteworthy commitment to conserving the heritage resources of the region."

The Jury further commented:

The Jury would like to commend the efforts to safeguard a vernacular Khmer building of significant architectural quality, which has the potential to encourage other homeowners to also conserve their buildings. The Jury recognizes that the relocation of the house is common practice in this building tradition and has allowed it to be saved.

For the time being, the house is a private dwelling, but my intention is to preserve



A 360-DEGREE DIGITAL PANORAMA CENTRED IN THE MAIN LIVING SPACE THAT EMPHASISES THE DECORATIVE QUALITIES OF THE HOUSE AND ITS FURNISHINGS: PHOTO: PAUL STEWART



Siem Reap house since 2007' or: *The Chinese House* website: <http://www.chinesehouse.asia/>.

Darryl Collins holds an MA from the ANU. He first journeyed to Cambodia in 1994 with a team from the National Gallery of Australia, to assist the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. He co-authored the publication, *Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture' 1953-1970* (2006) and for some five years lectured at the Department of Archaeology, Royal University of Fine Arts, Phnom Penh. In 2004, Darryl began part-time work at the National Museum, Phnom Penh as manager for the 6 year Collection Inventory Project.

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this heritage for future generations. Into the future, my wish is to see this valuable Cambodian cultural asset managed by a responsible culturally-based organisation that will use it as a visiting scholars' residence.

I'm currently investigating legal processes to ensure this reality.

Further information can be found on my website at: <http://www.darryl-siemreap.com/> under 'Gallery:

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