

SIEM REAP



Darryl Collins (left) and Hok Sokol on the steps of the almost-disassembled Khmer house. PETER OLSZEWSKI

A moving experience with an antique Khmer house

Having saved one old Khmer house in 2006 by moving it 300 kilometres, Darryl Collins is set to repeat the feat in Siem Reap

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SIEM Reap-based Australian art and culture historian Darryl Collins is at it again — moving house.

But unlike ordinary folk who simply move possessions and belongings, Collins moves the entire house. With the aid of Khmer architect and colleague Hok Sokol, he embarked on his first moving experience in 2006.

This was a herculean odyssey involving relocating an entire 100-year-old historic Chinese-Khmer wooden house from an island in the middle of a river in Kampong Cham — disassembling it, then carting it more than 300 kilometres to Siem Reap, where it now stands, resplendently restored.

Last month he applied for the house to be given a Southeast Asian Heritage award, an annual prize handed out by

the regional UNESCO office in Bangkok each September, and is now awaiting the result.

But instead of resting on his chaise longue, Collins, together with Hok Sokol, started to move another house this week.

This house, another century-old wooden Khmer home, is not quite so grand as the Kampong Cham residence, and the moving experience is not so overwhelming.

The house is nestled beside the Siem Reap River rather than on an island, and instead of having to be carted 300 kilometres, the old house in Aranh Sakor village only has to be moved 2 kilometres.

This house is also special because, further research notwithstanding, it could well be Siem Reap's oldest domestic structure.

Hok Sokol said, "It's maybe just over 100 years old, and I think it's the oldest house in Siem Reap."

Collins is a tad more cautious.

"It's quite an old structure. Sokol has mentioned an age of approximately 100 years, but we can't verify that yet because we have to do more research on its history.

"I would think it would be one of the oldest domestic structures in Siem Reap. It would, of course, hold against some of the wats, but they're religious structures and are quite different."

As with the Kampong Cham residence, this house first came to the attention of Hok Sokol, who then alerted Collins to its existence and its need for preservation.

"When I was a student in 1997, my university professor had a small grant to invite four students to study the architecture of the houses in Siem Reap," Hok Sokol said.

"We travelled along the Siem Reap River, observed the housing and buildings surrounding

the area, and found that there were very interesting houses. But the owner has already modified and remodelled one of these houses. With this one, the owners recently abandoned it because they'd built a new concrete house, and decided to sell it.

Collins said he bought the house "basically to save it."

He added, "I'd known about the house for several years and Sokol and I came to see it a couple of times. It became vacant, more derelict, its condition was fading fast."

This week, Collins has begun disassembling the house and moving it to its new nearby location where it will be stored during the rainy season and then rebuilt. He said, "We built a structure on the new site to protect the wood and it will be okay to be kept dry for one rainy season. You can't store these houses for very long, and it will have to be rebuilt as quickly as possible." ■