

Case Study

Cambodia: Seeking National Identity through New Character of Architecture

Source: *Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture' 1953-1970* by Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Collins.

Written Interview with Darryl Collins **Interviewer and Writer:** Dini Kusumawardhani **Photo Courtesy:** Darryl Collins

Kamboja mengalami penjajahan dan perang berkepanjangan. Pendudukan kolonial Prancis di Kamboja berlangsung sejak abad ke-19 sampai tahun 1953. Pasca kemerdekaan, Kamboja memiliki visi bangsa baru dengan arsitektur menjadi salah satu target pembaruan tersebut. Karakter yang merupakan inkorporasi warisan peninggalan kolonial dan kelokalan Kamboja yang memiliki asal-usul Kerajaan Khmer—salah satu kerajaan tertua dan terkuat di Asia Tenggara—mendominasi negara tersebut hingga sekarang. Tulisan tentang Kamboja ini bersumber dari buku *Building Cambodia: ‘New Khmer Architecture’ 1953-1970* yang merupakan hasil penelitian arsitek dan urbanis Helen Grant Ross, bersama sejarawan Darryl Collins. Buku ini berfokus pada sejarah terbentuknya karakter arsitektur Khmer baru. Tim redaksi *ARCHINESIA Bookgazine* juga mewawancarai salah satu penulis buku tersebut, Darryl Collins, pengajar di Fakultas Arkeologi Royal University of Fine Arts Kamboja, yang membantu memberi perspektif mengenai arsitektur Khmer baru dari sisi sejarah.

Darryl Collins mengatakan bahwa pada masa penjajahan Prancis, para insinyur, arsitek, dan perancang kota yang terpusat di Hanoi dan Saigon, Vietnam, berpencar ke seluruh kawasan Asia (Tenggara) untuk menyebarkan prototipe Eropa dalam perencanaan *layout* baru pada kota-kota dan kepemilikan tanah berdasarkan prinsip perusahaan dagang Eropa. Model adaptasi dari arsitektur yang didesain berdasarkan kondisi iklim lokal menciptakan arsitektur yang ‘terbuka’ untuk pertukaran udara namun terbungkus dalam bata dan semen.

Generasi berganti, begitu pula arsitektur. Arsitektur yang berkembang dalam kurun waktu tertentu bisa jadi merupakan periode terpenting perkembangan fisik suatu wilayah. Perkembangan arsitektur yang signifikan di Kamboja terjadi pada era pasca kemerdekaan di bawah kepemimpinan Norodom Sihanouk. Visi pembaruan yang dibawa Sihanouk mengikutsertakan putra Kamboja yang mengenyam pendidikan di belasan negara, terutama Prancis dan Amerika Serikat, untuk memunculkan ‘wajah baru’ Kamboja. Sekelompok arsitek yang baru lulus dari sekolah arsitektur di Prancis kembali ke Kamboja pada tahun 1957, termasuk Vann Molyvann yang kelak berperan besar dalam perancangan beberapa proyek arsitektur mercusuar di era 1960-an. Bekerja sama dengan beberapa arsitek Prancis, Molyvann dkk. memiliki semangat pembaruan untuk membangun kembali identitas dan kebanggaan bangsa dalam wujud arsitektur yang membawa semangat lokal dan mampu melebur dengan arsitektur kolonial Prancis yang sudah lebih dulu ada. Arsitektur inilah yang pada masanya disebut sebagai Arsitektur Khmer Baru (*New Khmer Architecture*).

Proses mendapatkan karakter arsitektur baru bukan hal yang mudah. Hal ini berkaitan dengan

warisan yang sudah ada berupa arsitektur Eropa dan kebutuhan akan identitas lokal dari Kamboja, baik yang berwujud maupun tidak. Terkait dengan proses adaptasi tersebut, Darryl Collins mengutip wawancara Vann Molyvann kepada *A l’Ecole des Maîtres Angkoriens* pada tahun 1969. Dalam wawancara tersebut, Molyvann mengungkapkan bahwa menemukan kembali asal-usul (negara) adalah sangat penting, dan bahwa negara dengan tradisi kuno seperti Kamboja mesti menegaskan kepribadiannya sendiri. *“... we borrowed a lot from the West but this influence was ‘Khmerised’ so that our civilization was not weakened by being completely integrated,”* ujar Molyvann. *“Obviously, this did not mean reproducing the artistic creations of Angkor but to be inspired by them, to transcribe and adapt them to a new reality,”* lanjutnya lagi.¹ Dalam wawancara tersebut, Vann Molyvann juga menyebutkan tentang arsitektur tradisional Khmer yang dibangun dengan struktur yang sangat *rigid* dan terlihat klasik. Juga tentang rumah kayu Khmer dengan ruang-ruangnya yang terorganisasi, ruang terbuka di bawah panggung rumah, beranda yang dapat menangkap angin serta atapnya yang elegan yang juga berfungsi untuk ventilasi udara.

Perpaduan arsitektur kebudayaan kuno Khmer, identitas dan iklim lokal, serta pengetahuan teknis dari Prancis yang dibawa oleh Vann Molyvann dkk. terlihat dari proyek-proyek mercusuar yang dikerjakan sebagai bagian dari partisipasi Kamboja dalam kegiatan internasional. Partisipasi dalam suatu kegiatan atau peristiwa merupakan afirmasi publik untuk mendapat pengakuan. Sebagai bangsa yang baru merdeka, Kamboja pun melakukan hal tersebut. Hal ini tertulis dalam buku *Building Cambodia: ‘New Khmer Architecture’ 1953-1970*, *“One immediate result of independence was the opening to*



*contemporary ideas, international exchanges, sporting competitions, conferences and exhibitions.”*²

Pada November 1961, Phnom Penh, ibu kota Kamboja,

menjadi tuan rumah *Sixth World Congress of Buddhists* yang berlokasi di Chaktomuk Conference Hall, sebuah gedung konferensi hasil desain Molyvann yang didanai Amerika Serikat. Pada kurun waktu yang sama, Molyvann juga merencanakan Bassac River Development—pengembangan kawasan tepian Sungai Bassac seluas 24 hektare yang terdiri atas pembangunan perumahan murah dan beberapa bangunan publik, seperti gedung ekshibisi, gedung teater nasional, apartemen bank nasional, apartemen kota (*municipal apartment*), dan wisma atlet. Kompleks olahraga nasional yang megah pun didesain oleh Vann Molyvann yang bekerja sama dengan beberapa arsitek Prancis, seperti Um Samuth, Gérald Hanning, Claude Duchamin, dan Jean-Claude Morin. Kompleks fasilitas olahraga tersebut awalnya didesain untuk menjadi *venue* pesta olahraga Asia Tenggara pada tahun 1963. Namun, pesta olahraga tersebut tidak pernah terselenggara hingga akhirnya kompleks tersebut diresmikan pada tahun 1964.

Periode Arsitektur Khmer Baru pada hampir dua dekade (1953-1970) menjadi bukti pembangunan progresif dari Kamboja. Hal ini juga diungkapkan Darryl Collins dalam wawancara tertulis. *“Re-evaluating ancient architecture and its proportions and mindful of modern equivalents, building for tropical conditions using modern materials for construction, the use of integrated design elements and decoration formed a heady mix that produced an amazing range of commissioned government and private structures,”* jelas Collins. Menurutnya, sistem inkorporasi tersebut membuat Phnom Penh dengan segera menjadi pusat dan model bagi perkembangan (kota-kota) di Asia Tenggara pada periode tersebut.

Arsitektur dapat berfungsi ganda, yakni sebagai warisan budaya sekaligus aset masa depan sebuah bangsa. Sebagai sejarawan, Collins mengamini itu. *“Excellence in architecture—or any of the arts for that matter, either tangible or intangible, must rate as cultural heritage in due course; ancient architectural sites, temples, important examples of colonial buildings and ‘60s modernist architecture need to all*

be considered future assets of Cambodia. Architectural examples need to remain to be experienced spatially and in context, rather than be lost to demolition,” tegasnya. Terlepas dari perkembangan arsitektur Khmer baru, apa yang merupakan faktor paling penting dalam menciptakan kota yang layak huni? *“Urban inhabitants who live happily in a pleasant environment, with a sense of historic of their city; without this people are lost as they lack of sense of origin and therefore future goals,”* ujar Darryl Collins.

Periode 1953-1970 disebut-sebut sebagai era emas arsitektur Kamboja—Phnom Penh pun dijuluki *“the belle of Southeast Asia”*. Warisan arsitektur periode tersebut telah banyak dialihfungsikan untuk menyesuaikan kebutuhan saat ini. Darryl Collins yang telah bermukim di Kamboja sejak 1994 mengungkapkan bahwa selama satu dekade terakhir, Phnom Penh telah berubah secara signifikan dengan pembangunan bangunan tinggi dan penghancuran bangunan-bangunan tua yang memiliki nilai historis. Bahkan, disebut penulis dalam buku, National *Sports Complex* dan *Bassac River Development* di Phnom Penh yang merupakan warisan penting periode tersebut kini telah dirusak oleh ‘pembangunan yang terlalu bersemangat’ di era modern. Pembangunan dengan kepentingan bisnis dan ekonomi menjadi lebih besar daripada pertimbangan untuk perlindungan warisan arsitektur.

➤ Cambodia suffers from a very long occupation and war. Cambodia’s French colonial occupation lasted from the 19th century until 1953. Post-independence, Cambodia as a nation has a new vision, and architecture is one of the main targets of this renaissance. The characteristic is an incorporation of the colonial legacy and Cambodian localities originated from the Khmer Empire—one of the oldest and most powerful empires in Southeast Asia—and it still dominates the country until now. This article is based on the book *Building Cambodia: ‘New Khmer Architecture’ 1953-1970*, which is the result of a research conducted by architect and urbanist, Helen Grant Ross, with Darryl Collins, a historian. This book focuses on the history of the formation of the character of the new Khmer architecture. *ARCHINESIA Bookgazine’s* editorial team also interviewed one of the authors of the book, Darryl Collins, who is a lecturer at the Faculty of Archaeology of the Royal University of Fine Arts of Cambodia, who helped to give a new historical perspective on Khmer architecture.

Darryl Collins stated that during the French occupation, the architects and urban planners, who were concentrated in Hanoi and Saigon, Vietnam, spread across the whole Southeast Asian regions to disseminate the European prototype in new urban planning and layout, and land ownership based on the principles of European trading companies. The architectural model adapted and designed based on the local climate conditions created an open architecture designs that promoted air circulations while keeping the buildings enclosed in bricks and cement.

Generations—as well as architecture—change. Architecture developing in a certain period of time may be the most important period of physical development of an area. Significant architectural development in Cambodia occurred in post-colonial era under the leadership of Norodom Sihanouk. The reformist vision of Norodom Sihanouk included Cambodians who were educated in a dozen foreign countries—mainly France and the United States—to develop the ‘new face’ of Cambodia. A group of architects who had recently graduated from the school of architecture in France returned to Cambodia in 1957, including Vann Molyvann who later played a major role in the design of several architectural flagship projects in the 1960s. Cooperating with several French architect, Molyvann et al. focused their minds to renew and rebuild the identity and pride of their nation in the form of local architecture that brought out the local spirit and were capable of merging with the existing French colonial architecture. This is known as the New Khmer Architecture.

The process of building a new and distinctive architectural characteristic was not an easy endeavor. It was connected to the existing European architectural legacy and the need of a local Cambodian identity, both tangible and intangible. In relation to this adaptation process, Darryl Collins quoted Van Molyvann’s interview with A l’Ecole des Maîtres Angkoriens in 1969. In the interview, Molyvann stated that the rediscovering of Cambodia’s origin was very important, and that a country with ancient traditions such as Cambodia must define its own personality. *“... we borrowed a lot from the West but this influence was ‘Khmerised’ so that our civilization was not weakened by being completely integrated,”* said Molyvann. *“Obviously, this did not mean reproducing the artistic creations of Angkor but to be inspired by them, to transcribe and adapt them to a new reality,”* he continued.¹ In the interview, Van Molyvann also mentioned the traditional Khmer architecture which was built with a rigid and classical structure. He also mentioned about the highly organized Khmer wooden houses with its open area under the stilts, the open air verandahs, and elegant roofs that also function as ventilations.

The amalgamation of ancient Khmer culture and identity, local climate, and the technical knowledge of the French brought by Vann Molyvann et al. can be seen from the flagship projects constructed as part of Cambodia’s participation in international activities. Participation in an activity or event is a public affirmation to gain recognition. And as a newly independent nation, Cambodia also did it. As written in the book *Building Cambodia: ‘New Khmer Architecture’ 1953-1970*, *“One immediate result of independence was the opening to contemporary ideas, international exchanges, sporting competitions, conferences and exhibitions.”* In November 1961, the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, hosted the Sixth World Congress of Buddhists in Chaktomuk Conference Hall; a conference building designed by Molyvann and was funded by the government of the United

States. At the same time, Molyvann also planned the Bassac River Development—a development project on a 24-hectares area along the banks of the Bassac River consisting of the construction of cheap housing and several public buildings, including an exhibition building, a national theater, a national bank apartment, city apartments (municipal apartment) and an athletes’ apartment. Cambodia’s magnificent sports complex was designed by Vann Molyvann in cooperation with several French architects, such as Um Samuth, Gérald Hanning, Duchamin Claude and Jean-Claude Morin. The sports complex facility was originally designed to be the venue for the Southeast Asian Games in 1963. But the Games were canceled, and the complex was officially opened in 1964.

The New Khmer Architecture Period (1953-1970) became the proof of Cambodia’s progressive development. As stated by Darryl Collins in the written interview: *“Re-evaluating ancient architecture and its proportions and mindful of modern equivalents, building for tropical conditions using modern materials for construction, the use of integrated design elements and decoration formed a heady mix that produced an amazing range of commissioned government and private structures.”* According to him, the incorporation of said elements has made Phnom Penh to become the center and model for urban development of Southeast Asian cities during the period.

Architecture can become both the cultural heritage as well as the future assets of a nation. As a historian, Collins agrees. *“Excellence in architecture—or any of the arts for that matter, either tangible or intangible, must rate as cultural heritage in due course; ancient architectural sites, temples, important examples of colonial buildings and ‘60s modernist architecture need to all be considered future assets of Cambodia. Architectural examples need to remain to be experienced spatially and in context, rather than be lost to demolition,”* he said. Apart from the new Khmer architecture development, what is the most important factor in creating a livable city? *“Urban inhabitants who live happily in a pleasant environment, with a sense of historic of their city; without this people are lost as they lack of sense of origin and therefore future goals,”* explained Collins.

The period between 1953 and 1970 is widely known as the golden era of architecture in Cambodia, and Phnom Penh was dubbed “the belle of Southeast Asia”. A number of architectural heritages of that period have been converted to fit current needs. Darryl Collins, who has been living in Cambodia since 1994 reveals that over the last decade, Phnom Penh has changed significantly with the construction of skyscrapers and the demolition of historical old buildings. In fact, as written in the book, the National Sports Complex and Bassac River Development in Phnom Penh, which is an important legacy of this period, has now been undermined by ‘overzealous development’ of the modern era. Development with business and economic interests has become a bigger consideration than mere protection of architectural heritage.

^[1] Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture' 1953-1970, hlm. 206 pada kolom 'Reasserting Cambodian Culture'

^[2] Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture' 1953-1970, hlm. 4

^[1] Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture' 1953-1970, page. 206 in 'Reasserting Cambodian Culture'

^[2] Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture' 1953-1970, page. 4