

# STREETSCAPES

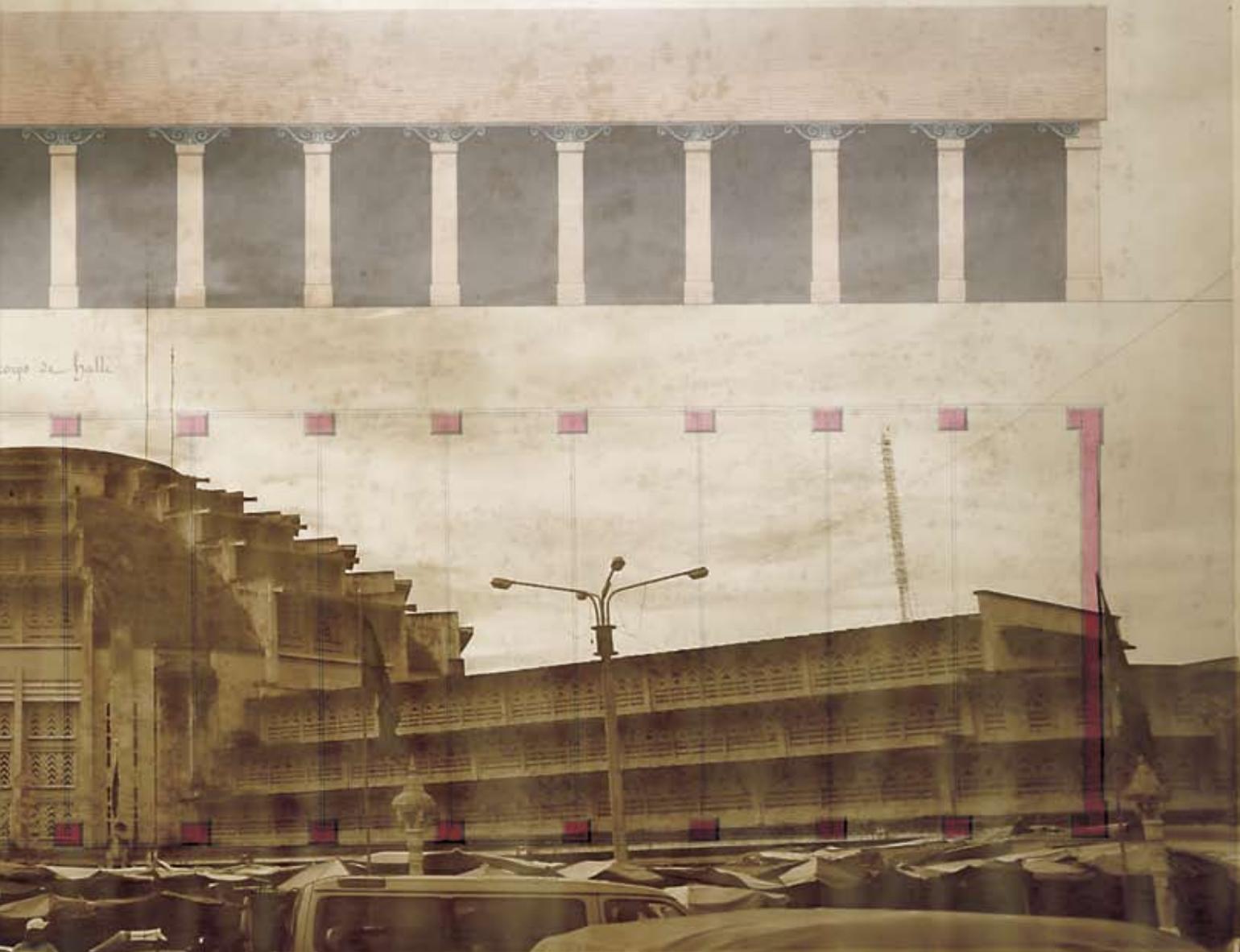
Founded in the 15th century, rebuilt by the French and then reconstructed in the era between independence and the arrival of Lon Nol, Phnom Penh is a mesh of styles, planning and history. Despite so many social upheavals, three distinctive eras of architecture remain intact - Early Historical, French Colonial and New Khmer. **Darryl Collins** walks us through the buildings, architects and spaces that make this city into the one we know today.

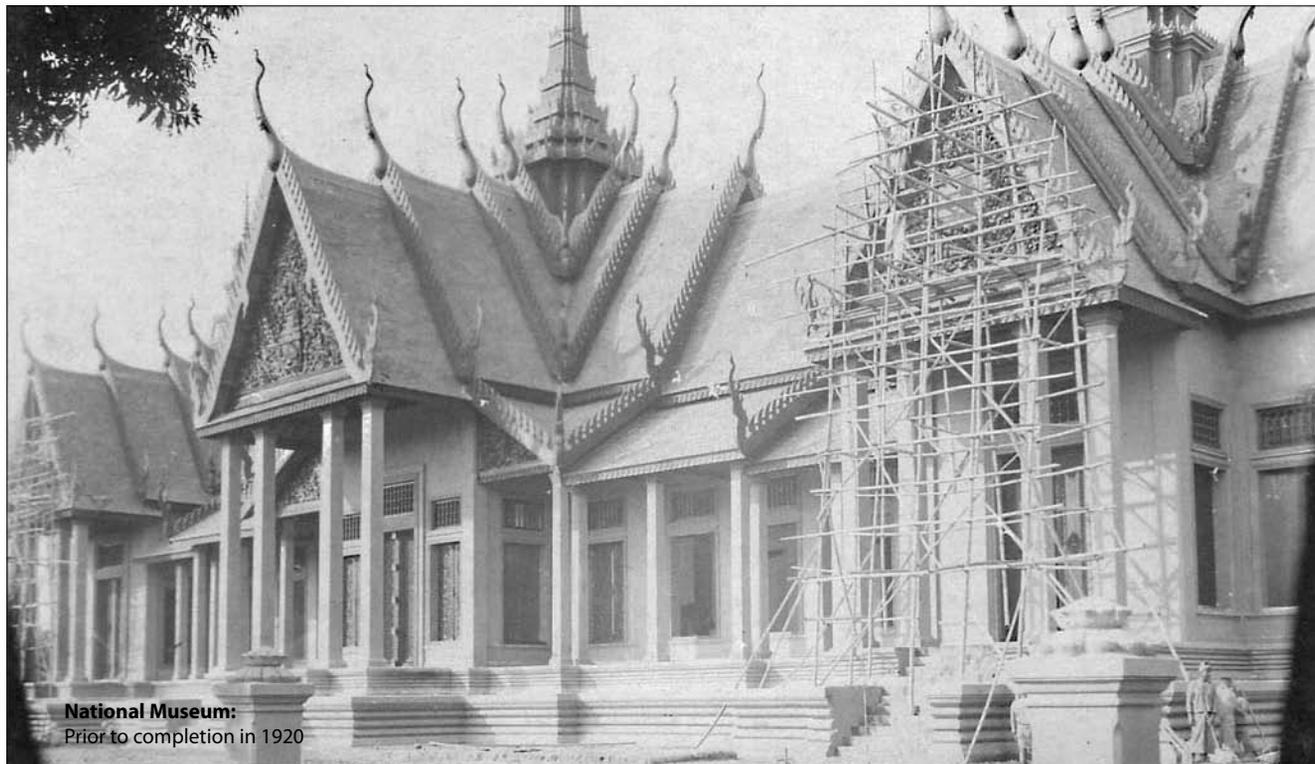
FLUIDITY AND SPACES VENTILATED BY natural airflow are hallmarks of Khmer vernacular architecture. Throughout the city, French colonial examples of the late 19th to mid-20th century co-exist with 1960s 'modern'. All in varying degrees attempt to accommodate Cambodian climatic conditions that often bring either torrential rain or blazing sunshine.

The city also has some of the finest pagodas in Cambodia, and in the Royal Palace one of the

most majestic buildings in South-East Asia. An architectural tour around Phnom Penh provides a snapshot of its sometimes turbulent, sometimes glorious history.

As is the case with the capital's wining and dining scene, the riverfront makes for an excellent starting point for a blend of important Cambodian and colonial architecture. However some of the finest examples run along the town's main thoroughfares including Russian Boulevard.





**National Museum:**  
Prior to completion in 1920

■ **AROUND THE ROYAL PALACE**

Set slightly back from the riverfront, the Royal Palace is Phnom Penh's most memorable building complex. Originally established with the founding of the city by King Ponhea Yat in 1434, the present palace was constructed by King Norodom and officially opened in 1870.

Some buildings were constructed at the end of the 19th century, while other wooden structures were demolished and reconstructed to original designs in concrete, brick and stucco. A number of important buildings reveal a distinct blending of French, Thai and Khmer styles. Extensively renovated in 1962 to its present form, the Royal Palace is in part open to visitors. The Khemarin Palace remains the private residence of HM King Norodom Sihamoni and members of the royal family.

Dating back to the late 19th century and directly opposite the palace on Sothearos Boulevard, Hotel Renakse was formerly the Cambodian Court. Next to it, the High Court and Court of Appeals was inaugurated in 1925.

Constructed at the same time, the National Museum of Cambodia (1920) is a masterpiece of colonial design. Incorporating Cambodian traditional references by French museologist-historian, George Groslier, it was built over three years between

1917 and 1920 and extended in the mid-1920s. Originally named Musée Albert Sarraut after the then governor general of Indochina, it houses the world's finest collection of Khmer art – particularly works in bronze, stone and wood – dating from prehistory through pre-Angkorian and classic Angkorian to the post-Angkorian periods.

■ **THE WATS**

The first pagoda at Wat Phnom was erected in 1372 to house four statues of Buddha found by a woman named Penh, hence 'the hill of Penh'. The vihara has been rebuilt five times, most recently in 1926. The interior paintings date from 1970.

The large stupa contains the ashes of King Ponhea Yat and, according to tradition, the four small bronze images discovered in a koki tree by Daun Penh. Revered by the Chinese and especially the Vietnamese communities, an additional eclectic shrine to the north of the temple is dedicated to Preah Chau (Anakta Preah Chau).

Two other statues represent the Chinese sages, Thang Cheng (right) and Thang Thay (left). And to the left of the main altar there is an image of Vishnu demonstrating the wat's varied religious heritage.

Both Wat Phnom and its surrounds were extensively renovated in early 1998 and

**It appears to hover between buildings that line the street approaches like some alien spacecraft from pulp science fiction**

reopened to the public just prior to Khmer New Year celebrations in mid-April that year. Despite these extensive renovations it remains an important place for worship and offerings, especially during Buddhist festivals.

Two of the city's oldest wats are located close to the river. Founded in 1434 and 1442 respectively, Wat Ounalom and Wat Botum Vadey date back to the birth of the city. Both have been extensively rebuilt with no original buildings remaining – most extant structures date from the late 19th or early- to mid-20th century. However their interest is not purely architectural as they house the senior abbots of the two principal Buddhist orders of Mohanikay and Thommayuth.

■ **FRENCH COLONIAL URBAN PLANS 1850S TO 1950S**

Early French explorers and navigators were almost without exception naval officers. Many had the avowed intention of finding a 'river road' via the



**Pont de Nagas, spanning the Verneville Canal, at Norodom Blvd:**  
Dating from 1900

Mekong to China. This would open a direct trade route through Cambodia avoiding the coastal areas already crowded with ships from a host of competing European nations.

Following the formation of French Indochina in the late 19th century, colonial mapping and urban planning was centralised in Hanoi. A typical colonial city grid was superimposed over burgeoning towns that fitted in more with commerce than with social factors. As in the case of Phnom Penh, this conveniently partitioned urban centres into ethnic sectors or 'quartiers'.

Early colonial architects and town-planners such as Daniel Fabré and Ernest Hébrard worked from the late 19th to early 20th century to construct the necessary administrative, public and private buildings. Soon Phnom Penh was dubbed 'the Paris of the East'. During a brief stopover in 1936, the great silent-movie actor, Charlie Chaplin, commented on his surprise to discover in Phnom Penh certain reclaimed avenues – recently laid over former canals – which were "little sisters" to the grand Champs Elysées in Paris. The stone parapet of the Naga Bridge on Norodom Boulevard (at the junction with Streets 106 & 108) that once spanned one of the early canals, was reconstructed by the municipality in March 2007.

In the northern sector of the city, visitors can still find fine examples (although some in desperate need of conservation) of the works of Fabré and Hébrard.

#### ■ EXAMPLES OF FRENCH COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE

The main post office on Street 13 (1894) has recently undergone extensive renovation, and is the key edifice in a small square that is bordered by a number of once important colonial public buildings. This formed the heart of a French quarter centred on banks, postal services, administrative offices, hotels and traders.

A group of cultural, leisure and official public buildings line the north side of the well-planned Street 91. The splendid Hotel Le Royal (1929) was restored to its former colonial splendour by the Raffles Group and reopened in 1997. Also recently renovated are the National Library (1924) and the National Archives of Cambodia (1926) situated immediately

behind the Library. A former 'bureau' of the colonial 'resident' now houses the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

A group of public buildings along Streets 106 and 108 complement those on Street 91. Constructed out of reinforced concrete, the Phnom Penh Railway Station (1932) has much in common with the Central Market. The former public works workshops, used as the headquarters of the Royal Gendarmeries Phnom Penh, were demolished in 2007, but the treasury building (1891-92) still performs its original function. The former city hall offices (1880s-1925) now contain the administrative arms of commercial airlines and freight companies.

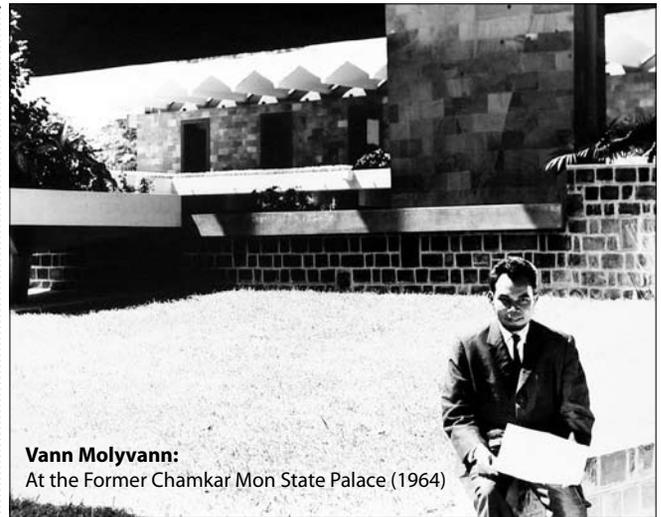
The masterpiece of art deco design – perhaps one of the finest examples of this style in South-East Asia – Psar Thmei (1937) is commonly known as Central Market, though it is correctly translated as 'New Market'. Designed by Desbois and engineered by Chauchon, it still functions as the main market of Phnom Penh. A wonderful domed structure built out of reinforced concrete it appears to hover between buildings that line the street approaches like some alien spacecraft from pulp science fiction.

#### ■ THE SANGKUM AND INDEPENDENCE 1950S TO 1960S

In an explosion of youthful vigour that accompanied Cambodia's independence in 1953, then head of state Prince Norodom Sihanouk launched into a campaign of urban planning, development and construction. Known as Sangkum Reastr Niyum, this period transformed many provincial centres including Phnom Penh.

Previously a French colonial outpost, the Cambodian capital was catapulted into an acclaimed city that bustled with energy through wider international contact. Visionary Cambodian architects took the lead and were largely responsible for the look of a place that soon became the envy of Cambodia's South-East Asian neighbours - by the mid-1960s Phnom Penh was dubbed 'the belle of Southeast Asia'.

Architects, engineers, UN experts and urbanists of the period include Vladimir Bodiansky, Henri Chatel, Gerald Hanning, Lu Ban Hap, Mam Sophana, Jamshed Petigura, Ung Krapum



**Vann Molyvann:**  
At the Former Chamkar Mon State Palace (1964)

Phka and most significantly the innovative architect, Vann Molyvann.

Molyvann's designs exemplify the essence of a new form of Khmer architecture that appeared throughout the city and in the provinces from the late 1950s to 60s. Some fine examples of this style remain, while others have suffered neglect.

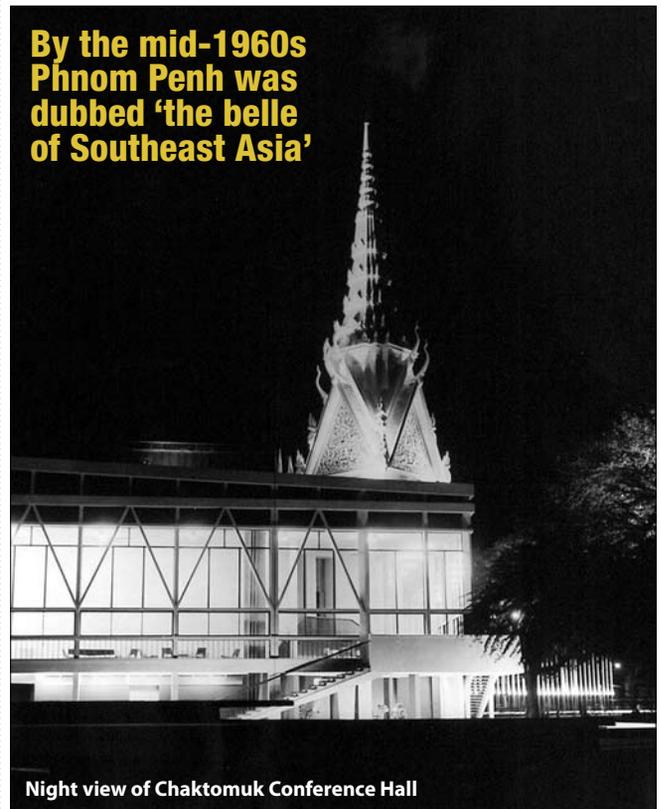
#### ■ NEW KHMER ARCHITECTURE

Molyvann's multi-functional Chaktomuk Conference Hall (1961) on Sisowath Quay has recently been refitted and renovated to once again be used for

its original purposes. This aesthetically pleasing, fan-shaped hall topped with a traditional Khmer tower lies close to the Royal Palace and overlooks the river junction at Chaktomuk.

Celebrating the country's release from French rule, the Independence Monument (1962), also designed by Vann Molyvann with soft pink, granite-finished concrete forms, delicacy of decoration and refined sense of proportion echoes those of Banteay Srei temple near Siem Reap. Located at the centre of a roundabout at the junction of Sihanouk and Norodom

### By the mid-1960s Phnom Penh was dubbed 'the belle of Southeast Asia'



**Night view of Chaktomuk Conference Hall**

COURTESY OF VANN MOLYVANN

COURTESY OF VANN MOLYVANN

**Facade of Le Royal:**  
Taken circa 1930



COURTESY OF DARRYL COLLINS

**Facade of Le Royal:**  
Taken 2007



PHOTO BY KATE BURBIDGE

boulevards, this prasat tower dominates the skyline with an appropriate air of solemnity.

Massive in scale and deceptively simple in conception and execution, the National Sports Complex (1964) is Molyvann's masterpiece. It encompasses track and field, an open-air stadium, an indoor sports hall, swimming and diving pools, and a grandstand built to international Olympic standards. Utilised through the 60s for both national and international sporting events, public rallies to welcome state guests and spectacular political and theatrical events, this complex is in danger of being rendered useless by unsympathetic development. The product of a team effort during the 1960s, a host of architects, engineers and experts contributed their services to see this

spectacular complex completed – it was originally designed to cover over 40 hectares.

**■ FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE**

Two buildings stand out on Russian Confederation Boulevard. Designed by Russian architects and built with Soviet funds, the Institute of Technology (1964) was a gift to Cambodia. Better known by its abbreviation ITC, it was an important addition to the growing number of tertiary educational facilities planned along this aptly named street, formerly called Boulevard U.S.S.R.

This complex of buildings is superbly designed to accommodate students in airy classrooms and corridors through louvered screens that extend over the entire façade of the main building. Renovated with French funds, the university now teaches the

subjects for which it was originally designed.

To the west of ITC, the Royal University of Phnom Penh (1968) was the work of two French architects, Leroy and Mondet. Originally known as the Centre Universitaire du Sangkum Reastr Niyum, the main buildings appear to float in mid-air, almost defying gravity by resting on slender supporting columns that allow the passage of air to circulate around the structures. Recently renovated, the university buildings form an impressive entrance to the city along the main boulevard from Phnom Penh International Airport.

**■ TOWN PLANNING SUMMARY OF THE CITY OF PHNOM PENH**

**1372** Daun Penh erects a sanctuary on the hill to house four Buddhist images

**1434** Traditional founding of Phnom Penh by King Ponhea Yat (1405-1467)

**1890s** Facelift of Phnom Penh and Wat Phnom by architect and town planner, Daniel Fabrè

**1925** Hébrard publishes an urban proposal 'Plan d'Extension de la Ville de Phnom-Penh

**1955** Sangkum Reastr Niyum period commenced with local architects sometimes working in partnership with French, European and US experts and advisors to create an authentic Cambodian style labelled 'New Khmer Architecture'

**1970** Sangkum period ends.

**■ WALKING OR 'CYCLO' TOURS**

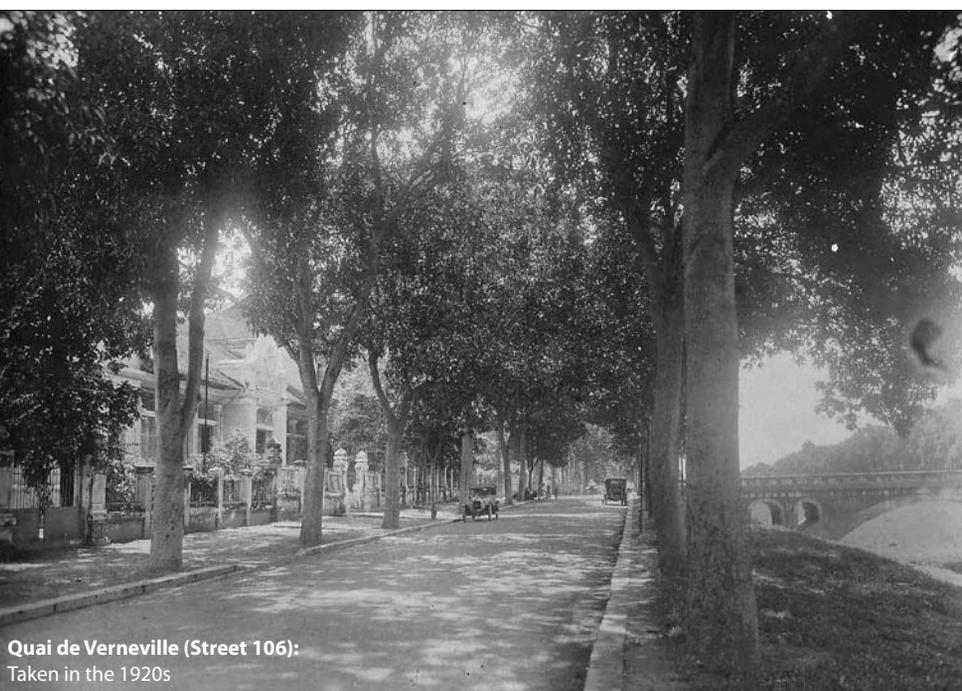
**1) Early historical:** pre-1850s  
Sites of Royal Palace; Wat Phnom; Wat Ounalom; Wat Botum Vadey

**2) Colonial:** 1850s-1950s  
Norodom Boulevard; National Museum of Cambodia; Railway Station; Post Office area; Psar Thmei; Royal Palace area; Street 91; Streets 106 & 108.

**3) Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1950s-1960s)**  
Russian Confederation Boulevard: Council of Ministers, Ministry of Defence & Army Headquarters, Institute of Technology, Royal University of Phnom Penh; Monivong Boulevard; Chaktomuk Conference Hall; Independence Monument; National Sports Complex.

*Darryl Collins is co-author of the 2006 publication 'Building Cambodia: New Khmer Architecture 1953-1970'. **A***

COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CAMBODIA



**Quai de Verneville (Street 106):**  
Taken in the 1920s