

Planning Urban Development from an Outsider's Perspective: Siem Reap, the Backdrop of Changing Urban Representations

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Abstract

This article explores the internationalization of urban planning in Siem Reap, the town situated as the gateway to the Archaeological Park of Angkor. After Angkor was listed as a World Heritage Site in 1992, international donors and consultants have been involved in the management of Siem Reap Province, where the archaeological park is located. Not only have they been engaged in the conservation and the enhancement of the archaeological heritage, but they have also planned the future development of nearby Siem Reap. Foreign consultants, coming from Europe and East Asia, have tried to determine what the best suitable models and tools for the urban development of Siem Reap should be, while tourism development and foreign investments were constantly growing. No planning proposal implemented has been completely successful but, several teams of international consultants have carried out new plans that acknowledged the evolution of the urban context. In this article, I question the representation of urban space formulated by these plans and the way they were constructed by consultants coming from different cultural backgrounds and having specific objectives. The article describes how Siem Reap's built heritage and recent urban phenomena are perceived and analyzes how internationally shared notions and principles (e.g., the discourse of "sustainable development") influence the imagination of future urban development. Faced with the failure of this series of plans, Siem Reap appears to be the backdrop to where evolving urban imagination takes place.

Keywords: urban planning, World Heritage, international cooperation, Siem Reap

The interest of international cooperation in the urban development of Siem Reap

In 1992, as Angkor was being listed as a World Heritage Site, the International Paris conference on Cambodia (1991) had just celebrated Cambodia's newly acquired independence and sovereignty after the end of the

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Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979)¹ and the Vietnamese occupation (1979-1989).² Between 1992 and 1993, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) assisted with the establishment of the new Cambodian government. After years of economic restraints and international embargos, Cambodia opened its economy and established a free market by promoting a tolerant policy towards foreign investments.³ Within this framework, tourism was designated as one of the most promising channels to reconstruct the damaged Cambodian economy.

As a consequence, a number of international cooperation agencies flocked to Siem Reap Province, where the Angkor archaeological park is located. In 1993, they joined the representatives of the Cambodian institutions at the “International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding and the Development of the Historic Site of Angkor” (ICC). Since then, it is estimated that foreign agencies and consultants from at least 16 countries⁴ have been involved in some 38 projects in the protected zones of Angkor Park (UNESCO 2003). Donors and foreign professionals have also provided financial and technical assistance for the development of Siem Reap town, located six kilometers from the main temples of Angkor. Since the World Heritage designation, Siem Reap has experienced disruptive processes of urban development, becoming an international tourism hub. However, by the end of 2009, none of the plans to intervene in Siem Reap town were completed successfully: some were left in the pipeline while some others, more recently, fragmented into a number of smaller projects.

There are multiple reasons behind the failure of such projects. The first is that they were designed with little or no help by Cambodian officials and professionals. The second is that they were submitted to different Cambodian authorities and carried out by different teams of consultants who did not interact well with each other. The third reason is that urban planning was seen as a useful tool for conducting diplomatic relations with interna-

1 The Khmers Rouge were a political movement which claimed the return of the Khmer people to an ideal of original purity. After putting to an end the Khmer Republic led by Lol Nol (1970-1975), the Khmer Rouge established a totalitarian regime over Cambodia which lasted for four years. Almost one quarter of the population died under the regime because of the hardship of living conditions and the systematic repression of dissent.

2 The Vietnamese invasion overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime. A Vietnamese tutorship was imposed over the newly formed People's Republic of Kampuchea for ten years, until the Paris conference on Cambodia recognized its independence.

3 The Cambodian law on investments (dated August 4, 1994) recognized equal rights to national and foreign investors (except for land property, which is limited to Cambodian citizens) and established several incentives such as tax exemption.

4 Foreign consultants and agencies came from Europe (Italy, France, the Czech Republic, Germany, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Switzerland and Poland); from Asia (Japan, India, China, Indonesia and Singapore); from the USA and from Australia and New Zealand.

tional donors. In addition, this situation quickly translated into a number of negotiations with the private sector.

In this article, I will focus on the first of these three points. Without neglecting to mention the vicissitudes of these plans, I will analyze the ways foreign agents perceive and represent the town of Siem Reap and how they imagine its urban future in relation to the development of the tourist industry. The attempt to envision Cambodian towns is not entirely new, of course. Travelers as well as foreign professionals have written about and portrayed these places over the course of decades. They were certainly informed by their own ideas and representations of the specificity and qualities of these locales. My analysis takes into account such traditions and the ways they influence contemporary urban planning. Siem Reap-Angkor is the primary tourist destination in Cambodia, with 2.8 million tourists visiting in 2011 (Cambodian Ministry of Tourism 2011); it currently attracts consultants from very different backgrounds and with very different objectives in mind. These consultants and their influence over the territory have transformed Siem Reap into a laboratory where different ways of imagining the urban landscape converge and take form.

A rationalizing tradition: how to conserve and reproduce the “vegetal town”

In 1996, Siem Reap had only 50,000 inhabitants, while the surrounding villages hosted a population of 75,000 (ARTE-BCEOM 1995). It consisted of several neighboring villages of wooden houses scattered along the river, which had been there at least since the middle of the nineteenth century (Hetreau Pottier 2008). These villages were enmeshed with vegetation and agricultural plots and each one of them had a Buddhist monastery. The hydraulic structures, such as canals and ponds, were connected to the gardens and managed the irregular quantity of water provided by the monsoonal climate. Siem Reap's commercial and administrative districts were built between the 1920s and the 1930s by the French colonial administration. The commercial district was made up of concrete shop-houses, which sat on thick blocks, that grew around a market, while the administrative area consisted of villas on big planted plots. The commercial areas built later during the 1980s were organized along the main urban axes.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Siem Reap was of relatively small size because its development had been quite slow over the course of the twentieth century, and because the processes of urban development launched after the independence of the country in 1953 had been abruptly interrupted by the Khmer Rouge regime. Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge had forced the urban population to move outside the cities and to the countryside. In Siem Reap, such massive eviction took place in 1975. When the

Vietnamese invasion put an end to the regime in 1979, the inhabitants were allowed to return to the cities. However, until the international Paris conference on Cambodia (1991), the pace of urban development was slow and the town continued to revolve around its two colonial sectors surrounded by villages.

As mentioned above, immediately after Angkor was designated a World Heritage site in 1992, a number of foreign consultants were hired to plan the management of the whole Siem Reap Province, and in particular the town's development. At the time a series of questions were raised. Among others, they concerned the most suitable pattern of urban development and its impact on a village-like small town. Between 1993 and 1994, a number of archaeologists, economists, scientists, architects and urban planners, computer specialists, anthropologists, agronomists, engineers and geographers gathered for the "Zoning and Environmental Management Plan for Angkor" (ZEMP), followed by a royal decree that implemented a legal zoning system for the province.⁵ The study was intended to cover different aspects in the management of the site and included a chapter on urban planning written by a French and a Cambodian consultant.

A few years later, two French based teams, the architectural firm ARTE-Charpentier⁶ and the semi-public company BCEOM⁷ won the bid to design an "Urban Reference Plan for Siem Reap" (*Plan d'urbanisme de référence*, PUR). This plan, finalized in 1995, aimed at providing the general guidelines for urban development for the following twenty years.

ZEMP and PUR shared a common vision of Siem Reap, of its urban reality and its future developments. Both valued the urban form that originated from its villages and that had been progressively absorbed by urban development during the twentieth century. The French team of PUR defined Siem Reap as a "vegetal town" to describe the combination of built forms, vegetation and hydraulic structures partially inherited from the Angkorian period. These same qualities have been appreciated by French travelers and writers since the beginning of the twentieth century. Pierre Loti (1912), for

⁵ Royal Government of Cambodia, 1995: *Sous-décret portant sur la création de la zone hôtelière*, n° 79, 13 October 1995 (available in French translation).

⁶ The acronym ARTE stands for Architecture, Recherche, Technique et Espaces Urbains-Environnement (Architecture, Research, Technique, Urban Spaces – Environment). The Parisian-based firm was founded in 1969. During its first life-phase, its projects were mainly targeted in Europe. At the end of the 1980s, ARTE was involved in the listing process of Angkor as a World Heritage site. Later, at least from the 1990s, the firm has implemented a number of projects in China as well.

⁷ The acronym BCEOM stands for Bureau Central d'Etude pour les Equipements d'Outre Mer (Central office for the buildings of facilities overseas). The company, created in 1949, specialises in infrastructure projects located in the former French colonies but has, lately, expanded its activities to many other different countries. It has presently changed its name into "Egis International".

example, was charmed by the tropical landscapes and the sense of peacefulness that seemed to permeate the lives of the people in that region. Loti was particularly caught by the “small houses that lined up along a thin path of sand”, and “the flowers that embalmed the air”, and wrote about the courtesy and friendliness of the local inhabitants of a place that reminded him of a “golden age” (Loti 1912, p. 50).

In line with these literary portraits, French consultants have described the “vegetal town” as “picturesque” (ARTE-BCEOM 1995, p. 18) - that is, worth being represented in a painting (Pleșu 2007). The local settlements were defined as “traditional” and perfectly integrated with the surroundings and with the geological, hydrological and climatic environment. By insisting on such features, the French made a clear-cut distinction between the “vegetal town” and the forms that were developed at a later time, by the colonial powers or even into the 1980s. In their intentions, the harmony of natural elements and human creations was to be preserved and somehow “protected” from urban development. To paraphrase Marc Augé (1989), urban planners have experienced the “ethnologist’s irruption”, that is, the gap between a past and a present, where the past has been somehow enmeshed in the present and reworked, and a sense of preoccupation towards the loss of past remains. Accordingly, foreign consultants planned to create conservation zones along the Siem Reap River and the main roads, with protection perimeters and inventories of valuable buildings, in ways that had been experimented with in Europe. It is worth mentioning that a similar idea had been developed by the EFEO (École Française d’Extrême-Orient) when it settled in Siem Reap in 1907⁸ and attempted to preserve the Angkor temples.

However, these measures were quickly revealed to be the product of an outsider’s perspective, founded and motivated by values and priorities which were not embraced at a local level. Indeed, they did not take in account the strong aspiration towards modernization of contemporary Cambodian society. The same buildings and urban forms that were regarded as heritage by the consultants were considered as obsolete by the Cambodians if compared to the new housing types of neighboring countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia. The recently established Cambodian institutions focused their programmatic objectives on socio-economic reconstruction, while encouraging investments in the construction field. Heritage policies were instead focused on the Angkorian remains which served to create a discourse that emphasized the glory and the richness of the ancient Khmer civilization. The position defended by the foreign consultants was

8 The EFEO, *Ecole française d’Extrême Orient*, was created in 1898 by the *Académie d’Inscription et des Belles Lettres* as a research institute. Since 1907, when Siam withdrew its hold on Siem Reap province and let it officially to Cambodia which was under the French tutorship, EFEO chose Angkor as its major archaeological field of exploration.

not shared by Cambodian institutions: this is one of the reasons, among others, why pro-heritage measures such as protection perimeters and urban regulations had little effectiveness.⁹ Construction permits were then issued in those areas defined as “conservation zones” and began to profoundly affect the inherited urban forms.

A vocabulary of inherited forms and a vision of sustainable development

Not only did the French experts wish to preserve the built heritage, but they also included its qualities in the construction of new areas and buildings. The French consultants of the firms ARTE - Chaperonier and BCEOM designed the master plan for a new hotel and tourist district named “Hotel City”, which would be located on a 560 ha. piece of land in the North-East part of Siem Reap, an area previously occupied by a number of scattered villages.¹⁰ The architectural design of this project consisted of big planted plots punctuated by canals and reservoirs. Ideally, large hotels made of wood would not have been taller than the coconut trees in order to reproduce the visual harmonic appearance of the inherited landscapes. In doing so, the consultants invented an architectural vocabulary which picked up elements of the Angkorian remains and the village settlements. Such vocabulary rested on their own interpretations of heritage, which was based on the aesthetic qualities of the rural landscapes, on the technical and climatic adaptation of the buildings, as well as on the environmental performance of the Angkorian hydraulic infrastructures. Such reproduction complied with a certain idea of “sustainable development” that is, the respect of forms and high quality infrastructures and in the reproduction of similar forms: in short, development inspired by local heritages. In order to attain sustainability and to shape the future of the city, one had to look at the past.

According to the “Urban Reference Plan”, “Hotel City” would be built far from the older town, in order to preserve it from urban development and avoid disrespecting Siem Reap. A centralized economic model was behind the separation of the tourist district from the older town. The consultants imagined that the profits made through new tourist infrastructures and activities could be redirected to the local population and converted into the preservation of their spatial and social environment, thereby attaching to their project an ethic of help and assistance towards those who were perceived to be at a “disadvantage”.

⁹ The promulgation of a national decree on “conservation zones” (n° 79, 1995) was a merely formal act and has never been enforced by local authorities.

¹⁰ The plot of land would become a public land reserve, and could eventually be extended up to 1000 ha.

Breaking up with tradition: the “compact city”, a new pattern of urban development

In the following years “Hotel City” never materialized while the two urban plans, PUR and ZEMP, remained in the pipeline. Meanwhile, Cambodian authorities issued construction permits for new hotels outside the area formerly destined for “Hotel City”. In addition, tourism-related plans were carried out in the town’s core area where no measure was in force.

In a reaction to a scenario of unregulated development, shortage in water supplies and pollution (to mention a few of the issues at stake) Groupe Huit, a French consultancy office that worked mainly on urban development in emerging countries, suggested tightening up and detailing all urban regulations in order to conserve the pattern of the “vegetal town” (Groupe Huit 1999). To this end, Siem Reap was divided into a complex set of zones and, for each of them, a list of acceptable functions and forms was established.

Under similar preoccupations, a consultancy group was funded by the European Union to design a plan for urban transportation in Siem Reap in the late 1990s (Tractebel 1997). This plan was later submitted to the Cambodian Ministry of Public Transportation with a certain urgency, while the ministers were accused of political weakness. The Belgian engineering team of Tractebel, specializing in infrastructure design, led the project and advanced two proposals for the development of the tourist industry in the area. These proposals, in contrast with one another, implied and imagined two very specific layouts for Siem Reap town. The first intended to limit the flow of tourists by circumscribing their distribution and movement in town. Such control would be achieved through the concentration of tourist facilities and infrastructures. The second, on the contrary, aimed at enhancing mass tourism through the construction of new infrastructures that would increase the circulation of people and vehicles. In both cases, the consultants of Tractebel were motivated by a desire to strengthen the efficacy of the urban system and the technical rationale of the urban infrastructures. Accordingly, they defined sustainability as the capacity of the urban system to absorb and manage increasing flows without incurring environmental damages. At this time, the issues of heritage recognition and attention towards the design of urban forms were relegated to the background. In the consultants’ view, unregulated development had already and irremediably altered the features of inherited forms. Rather than trying to maintain or recreate such forms, then, from that moment on, the town had to be considered as a quality-less place to be managed.

A similar perspective was adopted in two further studies for a Master Plan elaborated by the Japanese International Agency of Cooperation (JICA 2006) and by the Land Use Plan designed by the German Development Ser-

vice DED¹¹ (2007). These studies were based on the assumption that Siem Reap had evolved from a calm “vegetal town” as the gateway to Angkor into an international hub, a tourist destination with more than a hundred hotels. They identified a number of pragmatic issues that had to be solved through the implementation of new infrastructures and urban services and through private projects.

To assess urban management, the Japanese consultants made use of categories that were drawn from large metropolitan contexts such as, for instance, the distinction between “urban” and “suburban”. For Siem Reap they envisioned an urban area which corresponded to the 2km² commercial and administrative districts planned by the colonial administration between the 1920s and the 1930s, and a suburban area around that. The suburban area in particular included the villages that originally made up Siem Reap and that had progressively been absorbed by development over the course of the twentieth century. These villages had experienced tourism, especially a form of family-driven tourism, and while incurring some issues with densification and hygiene, had maintained their rural quality with their wooden homes, rich vegetation, pen-pit hydraulic infrastructures and dirt lanes connecting the houses and meandering through the plots. In the consultants’ view, these neighborhoods were “chaotic” and “incoherent” and needed to be restructured and upgraded.

However, what these studies had forgotten to take into consideration was that the spatial reality of Southeast Asian cities is far more complex than the mere juxtaposition of urban and suburban, or urban and rural. As previous research has shown (Clément and Lancret 1994), Southeast Asian cities often associate and mix these elements. Furthermore, the centripetal interpretation of the urban agglomeration advanced by the Japanese consultants did not correspond to its actual historical evolution: the consultants interpreted Siem Reap as if it had developed like a European city from a dense, historical center towards disjointed and sparse settlements. However, historic sources show that seven villages aligned along the river have constituted the core of Siem Reap since the late nineteenth century (Hetreau Pottier 2008). The commercial and administrative districts were built between the 1920s and the 1930s.

The Japanese consultants designed a pattern for future urban development that was labeled the “compact city”, which was inspired by the density and the spatial organization of the colonial commercial districts made up of compact shop-houses. Such a pattern was chosen for its technical efficacy and functional advantages in terms of energetic demands and costs for infrastructure buildings, and because it limited urban sprawl on agricultural land. On another level, these plans were also motivated by the Japanese In-

11 DED stands for Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst.

ternational Agency of Cooperation's agenda as an international cooperation agent. As explained by King and McGrath (2004), after having experienced both the role of the colonizer during WWII and the role of the aid receiver after WWII, Japan has tended to fund infrastructure building more than social assistance, governance and human resources. The underlying idea was then to offer the tools towards modernization, much in the same way as Japan had independently reconstructed its own economy after WWII by benefiting from international monetary assistance.

Overall, while the ARTE-BCEOM teams defined sustainability as an existing quality that one could discover through the study of past remains, the Japanese International Agency of Cooperation considered sustainability as an objective to be achieved in the future: a set of norms and plans related to the adequate exploitation of environmental resources and the equal distribution of economic benefits.

The rejections of urban planning: a first step for getting rid of inherited paradigms?

The consultants engaged in the earlier plans for Siem Reap town (ZEMP, PUR, as well as the urban regulations by Groupe Huit) imagined that new neighborhoods and districts could be shaped on the basis of inherited types and models. They particularly looked at the villages' architecture and spatial organization as a source of inspiration. In their view, the urban future could be created in continuity with the past. On the contrary, the Japanese consultants of JICA envisioned the "compact city" pattern as a concentration of "useful" infrastructures. Even if they mentioned the colonial commercial district as a reference in their plan, they did not design the new architectural and urban forms which were instead left in the hands of private promoters, investors and architects. Siem Reap's identity, as it has been perceived by outside planners, seems therefore, split between the town's rural origins of a big village and its development as an international tourist hub.

At the heart of the international planning for urban development lies a series of questions: how to design the architecture and the urban shapes of this contemporary Cambodian town? How to establish a relation with inherited forms, and how to introduce innovative elements which satisfy the aspirations of Cambodian society towards the modernization of their houses and neighborhoods?

In Cambodia, society has mainly been rural throughout the history of the country. As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, Cambodia recently experienced the Khmer Rouges' disdain for the urban environment and the consequent deportation of the population from the cities (Carrier, 2010). Cambodian people began to return to the cities in the 1980s and still represent only 20.8% of the whole Cambodian population, which is

low compared to Thailand (34%), China (44.9%) or Malaysia (72.2%).¹²

The idea that Cambodian society is mainly rural, along with the denial and sharp criticism of urban reality, is still very strong and visible in some of the recent documents of urban planning produced by international donors. One could look, for example, at the programs designed by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation GTZ¹³ and the World Bank, which are focused on the countryside of Siem Reap province (2006; 2009). Both agencies aim at enhancing agriculture and craftsmanship in the villages. In their discursive production the villagers are seen as the victims of the unequal mechanisms of economic growth, while Siem Reap town, where the economic benefits of tourism are concentrated, appears to be a place of social injustice. Because of this negative picture of Siem Reap, the town is neglected by these plans: the World Bank mapping of poverty for the province, for example, does not take it into account, and its surface is left blank on the map. The development of Siem Reap and its urban sprawl are presented as the inevitable externality of economic growth.

According to the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations ratified by Cambodia in 2000, poverty reduction is one of the main objectives endorsed by the Cambodian Government. Such reduction could be achieved, in the eyes of the consultants, by redirecting the products of agriculture and craftsmanship to the tourists and local market in order to generate profit to the material advantage of the rural population. However, while guided in increasing its revenues, the local population, its lifestyle and traditions have to be preserved as a value. Just as the French teams of ARTE-BCEOM, the GTZ and the World Bank define tradition as cultural and social expressions at risk of loss and agree that while necessary, transformations entail negative alterations. This position is close to the contradictory approach of colonialist policies, which aimed at bringing the colonized people towards modernization while stressing the importance of preserving inherited “exotic” practices.

In Siem Reap, urban planning has been designed for the last 20 years by foreigners who have maintained the colonial approach of looking at a place and its socio-cultural context through the filters of their own culture, ethics and, in some cases, ideology. The plans have been designed from an outside perspective and have been embedded with cultural paradigms that rested on and influenced the representation and perception of Siem Reap.

However, unlike during the colonial period when the French administra-

12 Source: online data published on the Sheerbrooke University's website: <<http://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BMTendanceStatPays?codeTheme=1&codeStat=SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS&codePays=KHM&codeTheme2=1&codeStat2=x&langue=fr>>.

13 The acronym stands for *Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit* (Agency for Technical Cooperation).

tors had a real influence on urban, territorial and economic management, nowadays, foreign consultants have little actual power in the implementation of urban projects. The failure of foreign plans shows a certain resistance by the Cambodian institutions, and an attempt to make use of and manipulate only those projects (or aspects of a project) that are seen as more of an interest (such is the case of infrastructure building, for example). What foreign agencies and donors perceive as political weakness might well be seen as political and local opposition.

Over the past 20 years, numerous plans for intervention and projects for urban development have been advanced and most have unsuccessfully completed their life cycle, or have been halted. At present it is hard to estimate their future influence on Cambodian intellectuals, architects, urban planners and officers. Further research is therefore needed to explore the forms of reaction and possible appropriation of foreign models in the local planning of contemporary urban transformations.

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