

Learning from Las Vegas, in Phnom Penh

“Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect.”

— Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, 1972

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INTRODUCTION

Why begin a 2012 studio about Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 1972 Las Vegas, Nevada?

Learning from Las Vegas has not run its course as a radical research practice. Its techniques and representational strategies have been deeply absorbed into the North American discipline and its modalities commonplace within that discipline. However, conditions of architectural education are not global and the influence of the 20th century canon of architectural literature, including *Learning from Las Vegas* has not necessarily reached those places it might now best serve, in this case the rapidly urbanizing cities of Southeast Asia, specifically Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

“Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect.” (Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, 1972) As the ‘existing landscape’ of Phnom Penh is perpetually unstable, learning from that landscape is a dynamic process. During the past 150 years the city developed from a French master planned town into a piecemeal post-conflict and rapidly urbanizing vernacular that is now being leveled and reconstructed through Haussmannesque plans driven by an influx of foreign investment capital and dictatorial governance.

Projecting Phnom Penh: Ta Khmau Strip Studio was a Fall 2012 architecture and urban design studio taught at Limkowing University in Cambodia. It explored projecting the conceptual future and physical extension of Phnom Penh onto the strip of land and highway between the wetlands and river connecting Phnom Penh to Ta Khmau: currently home to garment factories, K-TVs (brothels), and dense informal housing. The studio took as its starting point the mapping strategies and attitudes of *Learning from Las Vegas*. Teaching a complex, theoretical, and academic text not available in Khmer (language of Cambodia)

and to an audience denied a basic education in architectural theory was nearly a failure. However, the class recovered and read the entire English text of *Learning from Las Vegas* aloud together, stopping frequently to deconstruct a word or sentence, searching for its elemental meaning.

The course took place during a yearlong Fulbright Grant entitled *City of Water: Architecture, Infrastructure, and the Floods of Phnom Penh*. The resulting research and design projects explored the nature and agency of design in relation to these topics, with a focus on education and public outreach as tools for engaging with Phnom Penh’s urban transformation under the governance of an authoritarian regime.

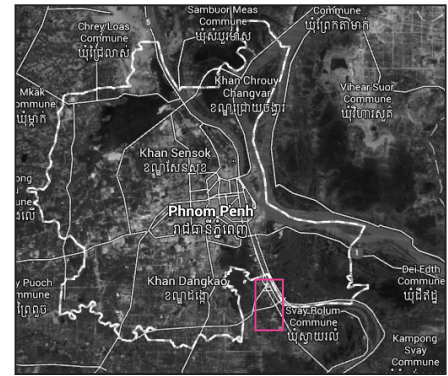
BRIEF HISTORY + POST-CONFLICT VERNACULAR

“Analysis of existing (American) urbanism is a socially desirable activity to the extent that it teaches us architects to be more understanding and less authoritarian in the plans we make for both inner-city renewal and new development.

— Venture, Scott Brown, Izenour *Learning from Las Vegas*

Learning from Las Vegas created a healthy controversy upon its appearance in 1972, calling for architects to be more receptive to the tastes and values of “common” people and less immodest in their erections of “heroic,” self-aggrandizing monuments. This provides essential lessons for Phnom Penh a post-conflict city still recovering from the nearly fifty years of war and conflict during the twentieth century. Following World War II Cambodia achieved independence from France in 1953 and a short period of peace resulted in intense artistic production including the physical manifestation of the independent country through New Khmer Architecture that blended Modern architecture principles with traditional Cambodian practices. King Norodom Sihanouk abdicated the throne to build his vision of a new nation; this short movement (1953-70) is best known through the designs of Vann Molyvann, a Cambodian architect educated at the l’Ecole de Beaux Arts. (Grant Ross and Collins, 1995) The Vann Molyvann Project, which aims to preserve and disseminate his work says of Molyvann: “he adapted a modern vocabulary to Cambodia’s culture, climate, geography, and its vernacular and ancient architectural traditions, in particular the buildings elevated what we now call ‘green’ technologies – double roofs, cross ventilation, brise-soleils, indirect lighting, evaporative cooling, use of local materials – into exquisite architectural form.” (The Vann Molyvann Project, 2012)

This ended in with General Lon Nol’s Civil War (1970-75), a protracted American bombing campaign (1964-73), the Khmer Rouge (1975-79), and the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia (1979-89). On April 19, 1975 the Khmer Rouge evacuated Phnom Penh as they waged war upon the city and its population as emblems of capitalism and corruption. Prior to the city’s fall, the population had swollen to two million as rural Cambodians fled United States bombing and General Lon Nol’s civil war (1970-75). Khmer Rouge policies, including starvation and forced work, resulted in the death of approximately one quarter of the population, 1.7 to 2.5 million people. Nearly ninety percent of artists and academics were murdered, severing Cambodia from its creative and intellectual past. Approximately fifty thousand people remained in Phnom Penh as the new government radically reorganized Cambodia into its utopian vision of a rural, agriculture-based and communal society. The Khmer Rouge selectively emulated



1A



1B



1C

Figure 1: A - Phnom Penh, located at the confluence of the Tonle Sap, Mekong, and Basaac Rivers. Political boundary indicated in white. B - Inset from Map A of the strip of road connecting Phnom Penh to the city of Ta Khmau. C - Documentation by helmet mounted GoPro Camera on Honda Super Cub.



2

Figure 2: Selection of the GoPro Images taken at 1 frame per second of the drive between Phnom Penh at Ta Khmau.

the Angkorian Empire and communist China. The most misguided project of the regime was to reconstruct the countryside into a one-kilometer grid of irrigation canals and harness the hydrologic methods of the Angkorian Empire. These projects were poorly located, sited, and engineered and failed into their intent to increase rice production for the starving population.

The ramifications of this lost generation have far-reaching and still developing impacts on contemporary architecture and urban design in Cambodia. Since the Paris Peace talks in 1993 the country has been ruled continuously by Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Cambodia's People Party a rule marked by limiting intellectual freedom, access to information, and public engagement in the development of Phnom Penh, a politically and environmentally complex city where criticism of the government, and its urban development strategies, is often unwelcome, censored, ignored, or in the most extreme cases leads to unjust jail sentences (See: Boeng Kak 13, Mam Sonando) or state sanctioned murder (See: Chut Wutty).

Sen's draconian development policies are marked by a lack of understanding nor interest in the existing conditions of the city, a post-conflict vernacular,

which in many cases result from individual efforts to maintain economies and settlement patterns in a hostile tropical environment without aid of formalized infrastructure: roads, sewers, electricity, and flood protection. These challenges include: daily wet-season flooding, aggressive eviction and relocation campaigns by the government, ongoing lake and wetland infill to produce developable land, lack of open space or park space to absorb seasonal flood waters, no public transit system, crumbling flood protection infrastructure, no agreed upon master plan, and an insufficient wastewater treatment system.

BUYING SOAP + PROMISED ORGIES

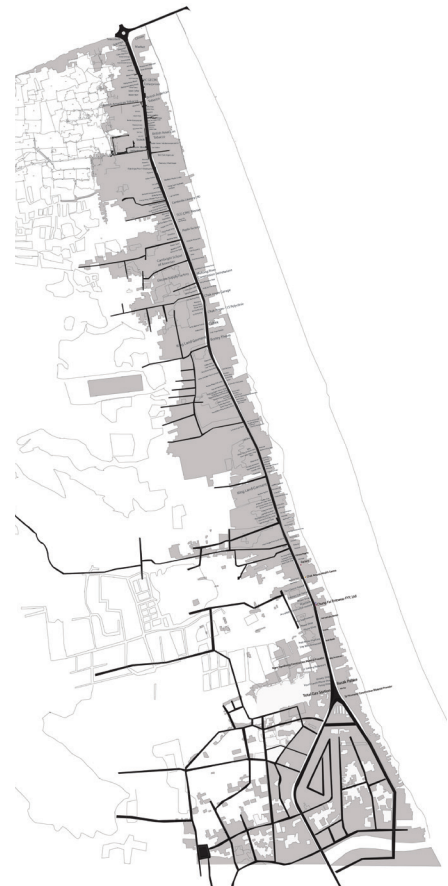
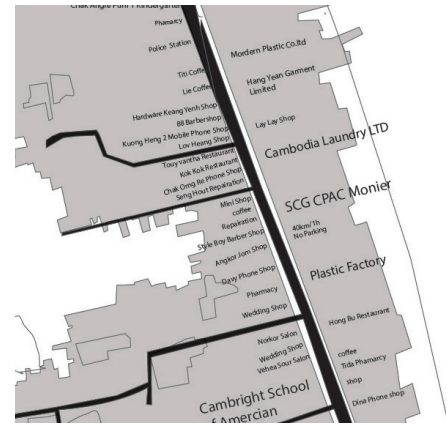
Reading Phnom Penh through *Learning from Las Vegas* does not benefit from the easy ironies of gaudy hotels, casinos, and drive-through wedding chapels. However, it does employ the same interest in considering all conditions of the city worthy of urban and architectural examination and attention. “Learning from popular culture does not remove the architect from his or her status in high culture. But it may alter high culture to make it more sympathetic to current needs.” The text suggests that irony as a tool of seriousness can be used as weapons of artists of non-authoritarian temperament in situations that do not agree with them and that architects who learn from their techniques need not reproduce the content or the superficiality of their messages. Interpretations of this kind of could produce a more gentle architecture. “(So) may the architect’s high reader suggest sorrow, irony, love, satire, the human condition, happiness, or merely the purpose within, rather than the necessity to buy soap or the promise of an orgy.”

In the roadside stands of the Ta Khmau highway, as in much of Cambodia, buying soap has design implications. Individual-use packages of shampoo, conditioner, and lotion hang in long strips from the cross bracing of shaded stalls. The soap is kept in soft plastic packets, serrated every three inches, so a single portion can be torn off and sold. Much can be learned from this economy and its urban implications. The design of single portion shampoo is intrinsically connected to an economy, which requires daily purchase of goods in relation to daily availability of capital. A bottle of shampoo assumes a different economy, which functions of the cycle of the week or month, which produces the capital necessary to move, display, and purchase a week or month’s supply of shampoo. The scale of the economy produces a scale of urban settlement that is organized around the temporality of the day, rather than the expanded space of the month or week that begets requirements such as shelving and refrigeration, which produce a different scale of urban occupation.

These stands are nestled between K-TVs, karaoke bars that are the public face of the brothels within. These are the ultimate decorated sheds. Functional spaces, dressed up as bars, and called karaoke theaters. Here there is none of the irony of Venturi’s proto-post-modern-hipsterism. The human trafficking issues of Southeast Asia are real, public, and have urban implications. However, a street might contain a K-TV, Buddhist Wat, and Primary School, creating an urban mash-up that does reveal the material necessary to create an architecture which values the mash up of this post-conflict vernacular.

PROJECTING PHNOM PENH

The goal of this studio was to produce an urban infill design strategy and architectural proposals for the corridor between Phnom Penh and Ta Khmau



3

Figure 3: Student work from Projecting Phnom Penh. The map indicates the location of all signage organized by relative size.



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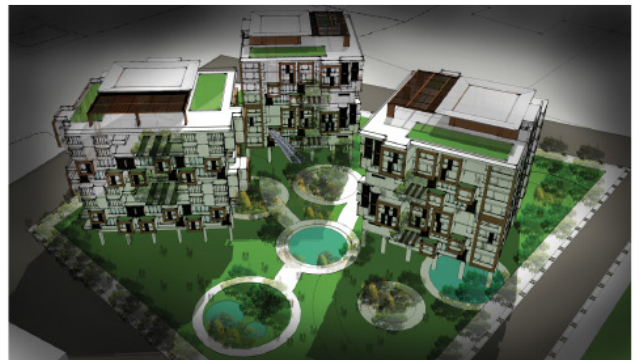
Figure 4: Student work from Projecting Phnom Penh selected mapping.

Figure 5: (opposite) Student work from Projecting Phnom Penh. Selected architectural interventions: Seng Heng Keang. Hin Pheaksovann. Vichet Damari. Nuon Keopisey. San El Vanthat. Seng Heng Keang. Sok Muygech.

on the strip of land between Tompum Lake and the Bassac River along National Highway 2. In a 2013 lecture at Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia architect Vann Molyvann argued that the development of Phnom Penh would best be directed to the south: “I think that if the city develops to the south it is better than to the west as the south is an area that is higher above the river, which is key to avoiding floods.” (Figure 1)

As the city expands questions arise of what will become of the surrounding wetlands and their contribution to the city’s sewage treatment and vegetable production. Are there master plan strategies available to preserve these wetlands? Additionally as they both grow, will the cities of Phnom Penh and Ta Khmau one day intersect? What will become of the boundary of these two cities? Will they be clearly delineated or will Ta Khmau be absorbed into Phnom Penh? And if so how can the expanding riverfront best serve both populations? And are there any current conditions that should be preserved?

Students mapped, photographed, video recorded, and modeled the current spatial conditions of the highway corridor and proposed infill planning strategies for affordable mid-density urban housing, mass transit stations (connecting both Phnom Penh and Ta Khmau), and an additional program of their choice. Specific mapping strategies were borrowed directly from Learning from Las Vegas: the scale and nature of the signs (though viewed from a motorbike), the density of electric light at night, the speed of traffic.



RESISTANCE

Students dutifully drove their motorbikes up and down the seven-mile strip over and over again, cataloging its existing conditions and translating those conditions into drawings and models. Illustrators maps drawn models made, and designs proposed. Together they researched dozens of theoretical design terms and learned names previously unknown: Rem Koolhaas, Frank Gehry, SANAA, Stan Allen, DS+R and so on. The discussions ranged wildly from whether Ta Khmau was a back door of Phnom Penh and whether it had any value? Did it deserve to exist in its continued condition? Why not just move the garment factories and brothels? Should the families illegally inhabiting the edge of the river be allowed to remain? Despite rigorously studying the site through the text of *Learning from Las Vegas* the Cambodina students felt strongly that the existing fabric had no value: it was dirty, disorganized, and provincial. They were captivated by images of Bangkok, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, and New York. They wanted their city to be organized, green, and grand with perceived glamour of Gingham or Times Square. The resulting architectural proposals reflect these desires (Figure 5). Students purposefully eliminated the undesirable strip vernacular. There are no Angkor Beer signs or Cell Card Ads in their renderings. The programs proposed are intended to be transformative and cleansing in their application: school, library, gallery, education center, and museum.

ENDNOTES

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7. Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas - Revised Edition: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* The MIT Press; revised edition edition (June 15, 1977)

CONCLUSIONS

Learning was transformed by its travels from the American desert to the banks of the Mekong River. It provides a framework for analyzing an unstable 'existing landscape': hydrologic, political, and economic. The students learned from Phnom Penh, but in their learning extracted different cultural lessons than those identified by Venturi et al. These lessons open up conversations about Cambodian legacy, identity, and agency as Phnom Penh develops into a globalized city and sheds the remnants of its post-conflict past. The translation of familiar techniques and representation strategies into new environments underlines the complexities of global architectural theory and probes the place of the 20th century architectural canon in rapidly urbanizing cities. Therefore, *Learning* remains a radical research practice and has continued life as a recursive dialogue between the Las Vegas of 1972 and contemporary urban conditions.