

Battered Beauties: a study of French colonial markets in Cambodia

Although some Cambodians would rather forget their French history, their towns are still scattered with colonial remnants: broad boulevards, fountains, French buildings. Among these buildings are covered markets, stylishly designed structures, vibrant with life. However, as time has passed, and war and poverty have stricken Cambodia, they have fallen into disrepair, becoming *Battered Beauties*. Something must be done; but why should Cambodia, a country struggling to provide even the most basic needs, be bothered with the preservation of its colonial heritage? And more precisely, which aspects of these old markets should be preserved?

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TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS, two themes were studied: the market's history – both indigenous and French – and their present-day functioning. Both themes will be discussed here.

Crowds from one end to the other – the indigenous market
The original objectives of the *Voyage d'Exploration en Indo-Chine*, a French exploration of the Mekong between 1866 and 1868, were never met, as the Mekong appeared completely inadequate as a trading route between Saigon and the wealthy Chinese province of Yunnan. However, the exploration proved useful in other respects, as local scenes were registered in numerous illustrations and texts, informing us of how markets functioned at that time. The market of Laos' Luang Prabang was described as follows: "The grand avenue of Luang Prabang runs for two kilometres from the city gate to the Nam Hou river. On market days it is filled with crowds from one end to the other. Hawkers and customers come there from early morning, some in the open air, others under large umbrellas or in bamboo boats. Fishermen bring huge fish which they have kept alive in the river. Natives from the mountains, recognisable by their tanned skins, turbans, and striped dress, arrive with baskets full of game, poultry and upland produce. Some Burmese merchants sell cloth, needles and betel boxes. A small number of Chinese sell opium, haberdashery and gemstones."¹

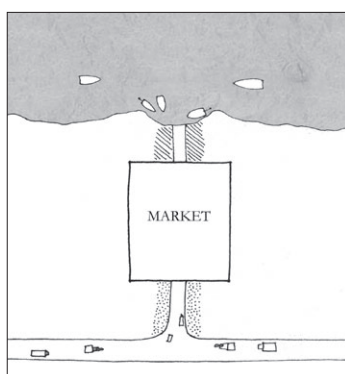
The market of pre-colonial days appears to be an informal meeting of both customers and vendors, conveniently taking place on the busiest road. Simple huts and pieces of cloth on the ground make up the market stall. Architectural elements serve solely as a protection from rain and sun.

In Vietnam's present-day countryside two types of markets can be recognised. The first type is very similar to the markets described by the French explorers; it consists of a collection of small huts made of local material, located along the village's main street (fig. 1). Large trees provide the huts with protection from the elements. The second type consists of a collection of separate stalls at the front and rear of a large hall; a configuration originating from the market's location



1(above): Country-side market in Vietnam: a collection of huts protected from the elements by large trees (source: author's drawing).

2(right): Country-side market in Vietnam: its location in comparison to local infrastructure. Dotted is the area for fruit and vegetables; striped is the area for fish and meat (source: author's drawing).



in comparison to local infrastructure (fig. 2). This market type traditionally appeared at a junction of tracks between villages and a body of water. Farmland products are sold at the entrance of the market, directly where the produce is offloaded. Meat and, above all, fish is sold at the rear of the market, as it is closest to the river. Inside the market solely dry goods are sold, such as clothing, toiletries and household utensils.

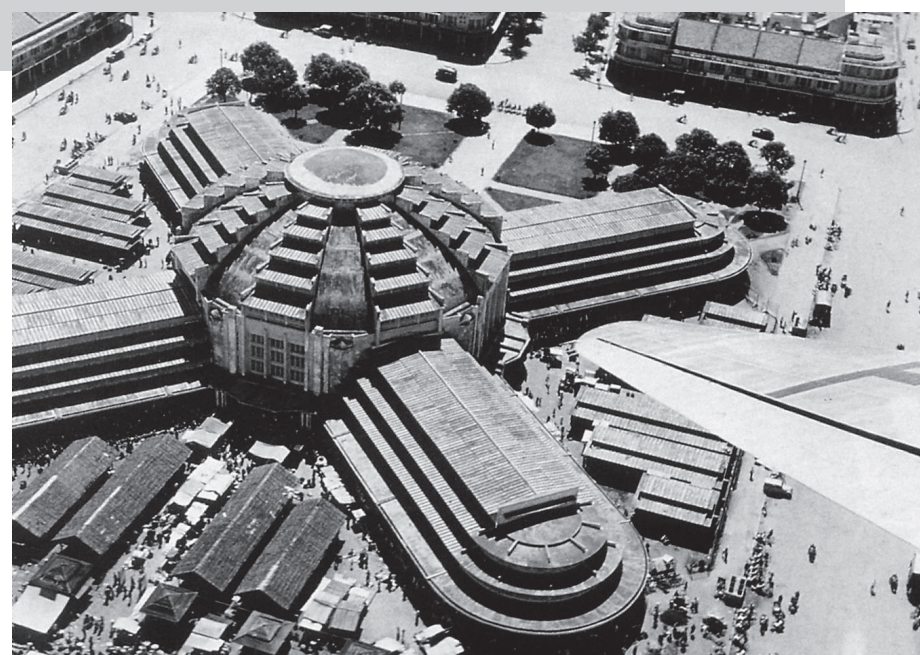
The impact of the region's climate on the market layout is evident, as it is directly influenced by tropical heat and rain. The comparison of the pre-colonial and present-day examples also reveals how even though goods and behaviour have changed over time, the village market has not changed significantly. However, we do see the introduction of the large hall, which can be attributed to French intervention.

Building a France away from France – the French colonial market

With the establishment of the French Protectorate over Cambodia in 1863 a new form of architecture and urban planning was introduced to the region. Preceding French intervention, Phnom Penh was just a string of huts on the bank of the Tonlé Sap River. The *Mission Civilisatrice*, however, obliged France to turn the city into a true *Perle d'Orient*, as it was after all her responsibility to share and spread her superior civilisation. This ambition was to be accomplished by architecture and urban planning. The colonial administration started to build a colonial infrastructure with the realisation of roads, railroads and public works. Covered markets were, just like city halls, prisons, post offices, police stations, schools and hospitals, part of these public works.

At first, French colonial administrations approached their *Mission Civilisatrice* in a manner governed by the principle of *assimilation*, which subjected people to an administration shaped by French values. This approach led to a large number of French public works in Beaux-Arts style, varying from prisons and military barracks to post offices and municipal theatres; all fashioned after the latest style in *Le Métropole*.

After WWI a change in French colonial politics in Indochina appeared; assimilation was replaced by a policy of *association*, which gave more consideration to local tradition and culture. With this change a more context sensitive architecture surfaced, which is best described by the work of the architect Ernest Hébrard, who introduced the *Style Indochinois*. This style derived its detailing and decoration from indigenous architecture and adapted more easily than the Beaux-Arts styled buildings to Cambodia's tropical climate. Local culture became not only an example from which one could learn, but also the face of important public works. However, Hébrard's style still relied on formal principles of the Beaux-Arts tradition; his plans were often symmetrical and consisted of volumes arranged in a classical sequence. His style therefore did not differ essentially from the Beaux-Arts tradition.² The *Style Indochinois* seems to have disappeared from the architectural stage in the early 1930s, whereupon a more abstract style arose. This style continued Hébrard's sensitivity towards local conditions, but it banned his literal citations of indigenous motifs and his formal references towards the Beaux-Arts

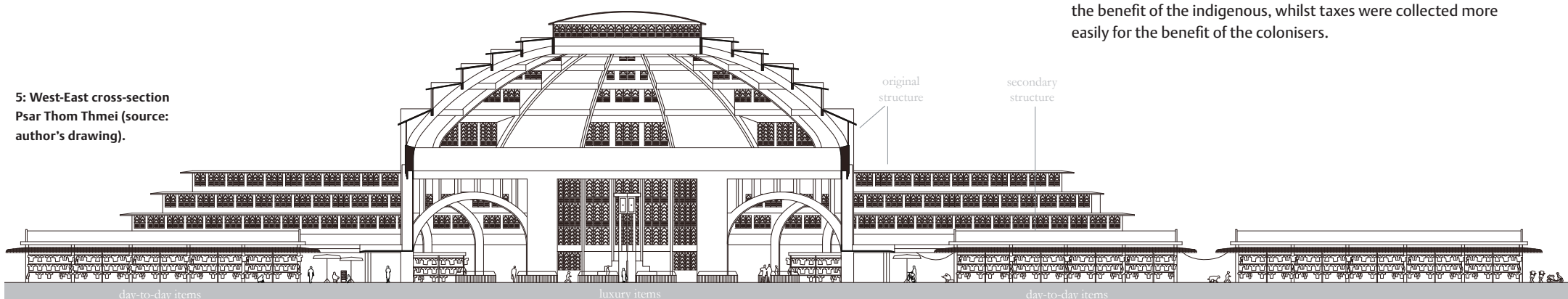


3: Aerial view of Psar Thom Thmei in Phnom Penh in 1952 (source: Heritage Mission, Phnom Penh).

tradition. Plans and sections responded primarily to their urban, social or cultural context; especially to the tropical climate. One could say that this last architectural style was most successful in unifying its French and Indochinese conditions. Cambodia's three still-standing covered markets from the French colonial period – *Psar Thom Thmei* in Phnom Penh (fig. 3), *Psar Nath* in Battambang (fig. 4) and *Psar Thmei* in Kompong Cham – are from this last period and architectural style.

When assessing how French administrations shaped their colonial towns through the years we see a growing indigenous influence as well. An examination of Battambang, Cambodia's second largest city, exemplifies this. Battambang lies on the Stung Sangker, a river originating in the Cardamom Mountains and draining into the Tonlé Sap Lake. Its shores have been inhabited by farmers and fishermen for many centuries. Preceding French rule the town consisted of a string of pagodas and huts along the banks of the river, with an open-air market at the crossing of dirt tracks on the western bank. However, a plan for its expansion was drawn immediately after the arrival of the French in 1907; it was a radical change from the spontaneous growth the town had previously experienced. The plan consisted of a network of roads and blocks of houses standing parallel to the river, with the original open-air market at its centre. In 1926, while the railway between Battambang and Phnom Penh was constructed, a second urban plan was made. The 1907 grid was extended towards the west and a number of diagonal streets were introduced, in an attempt to give the colonial town a more imposing and Parisian metropolitan look. The diagonal boulevards converged at the original open-air market, which was formalised by a covered market in 1937. The building was clearly a French conception; it was styled after the latest Parisian fashion – *Art Déco* – and built from *ferro* concrete, a material European architects extensively experimented with at that time. But, simultaneously, the design responded quite cleverly to its local setting and its tropical environment. It allowed the indigenous market to continue at its original location and a constant stream of fresh air that flowed through the plinth and the many roof openings resulted in a surprisingly pleasant interior climate. Colonial purposes were gracefully served by its erection; the market's hygiene was improved for the benefit of the indigenous, whilst taxes were collected more easily for the benefit of the colonisers.

5: West-East cross-section Psar Thom Thmei (source: author's drawing).



Both the evolution of architectural styles and the growth of the colonial town are indicative of a highly centralised colonial administration that shifted from the self-centred approach of *assimilation* to the more worldly approach of *association*. But even though indigenous influences were more welcomed towards the end, colonial purposes were never abandoned; French administrations clung dearly to their colonial beliefs. It resulted, in the case of the market, in the introduction of the large concrete hall.

A problem with memory – on the relevance of architectural heritage

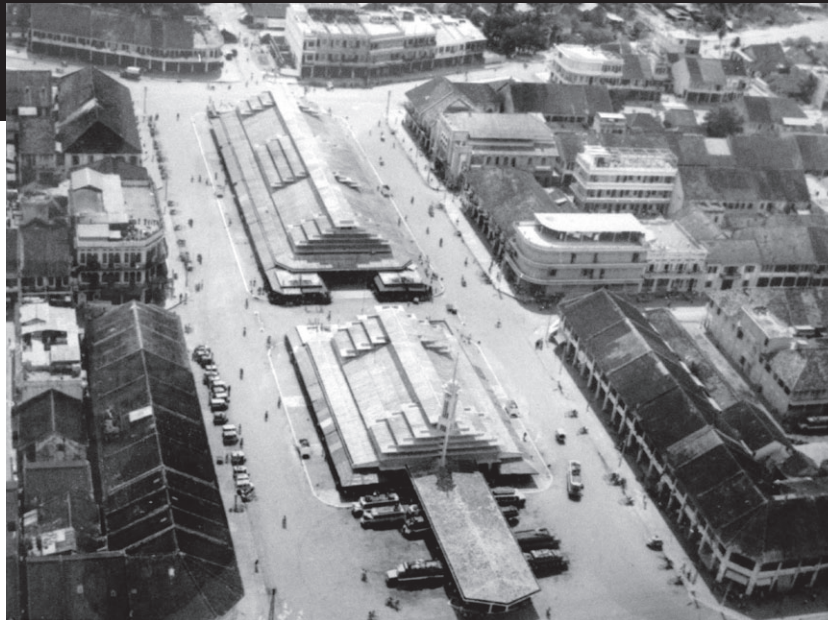
In Cambodia, in Phnom Penh especially, the preservation of built heritage proves to be of a precarious nature. Phnom Penh's real-estate prices inflated during the United Nations Transitional Authority Cambodia (UNTAC) intervention, which took place in 1992-1993. The UNTAC's objective was to ensure honesty and safety during Cambodia's first elections after the Khmer Rouge regime. However, as a side effect the UNTAC's wealth corrupted Phnom Penh's real-estate prices, resulting in land speculation and demolition, which still continues today. Heritage is especially vulnerable as it is often located at primary real-estate locations. The replacing developments are, most of the time, built with the simple objective to make money, sooner rather than later. Heritage law does exist, but its execution is often jeopardised by economic and political interests. One might say that a third-world country has the right to earn its money as quickly as possible, but as these developments are often done by foreign investment companies, the average Cambodian is not likely to benefit from them.

Nevertheless, some buildings are being restored and *Psar Thom Thmei* is one of them. Its original structure has been reinforced and repainted and looks splendid once again. New pavilions have been constructed, replacing the rickety self-built stalls that used to surround the market; new toilets, wash basins and waste facilities have improved hygiene conditions significantly. Nonetheless, the renovation also reveals the delicate question of how to balance aesthetics, preservation and functionality. For example, as the original market is now fully surrounded by new pavilions, the original view of a large, seemingly floating structure, can no longer be enjoyed. Furthermore, goods with a lower revenue, such as fresh produce, have disappeared from the original structure. Nowadays only luxury items are sold from these stalls. So, the future use of the market has been ensured, but the future of its aesthetics remains to be seen.

Although high real-estate prices explain the land speculations in Phnom Penh to some extent, a different kind of argument seems to lie beneath. Theodora Burgeat, communication officer at the Heritage Mission Phnom Penh explains: "Cambodia has a problem with memory; talking about the past is not so easy since the Khmer Rouge. The authorities mostly prefer to focus on the construction of high, new buildings, regarding them as a symbol of the modernisation of the country."³

Dealing with the past has become a painful experience for Cambodian people. Especially young Cambodians prefer to forget the past and deal with the present and future. This mentality results in an unawareness of the historical value of built heritage, French colonial structures included.

Luckily, just a couple hundred kilometres away from Phnom Penh, Battambang Municipality is actively protecting its built heritage. A team from the German Development Service and the Battambang Municipal Administration has had the opportunity to map, research and evaluate the built heritage of Battambang. The involvement of the municipality has proven to be the key to success, as they have the authority to implement laws and regulations. The research has resulted in a Future Land Use Plan for 2020 for Battambang city and district. Centrally located in this plan lies the 'Heritage Protection Area', Battambang's colonial town centre, which consists of about 800 historically relevant buildings. As more and more tourists visit Battambang for its colonial town centre, the preservation of built heritage has become interesting from both a historical and economical point of view, which makes it easier to convince private heritage-owners to preserve their buildings. It illustrates how administrative policy affects the future of heritage and how relatively quickly changes can be made.



4: Aerial view of Psar Nath in Battambang in 1960 (source: Grant Ross, Battambang, Le Bâton Perdu).

Skinned frogs and slithering eels – on the present-day functioning of markets

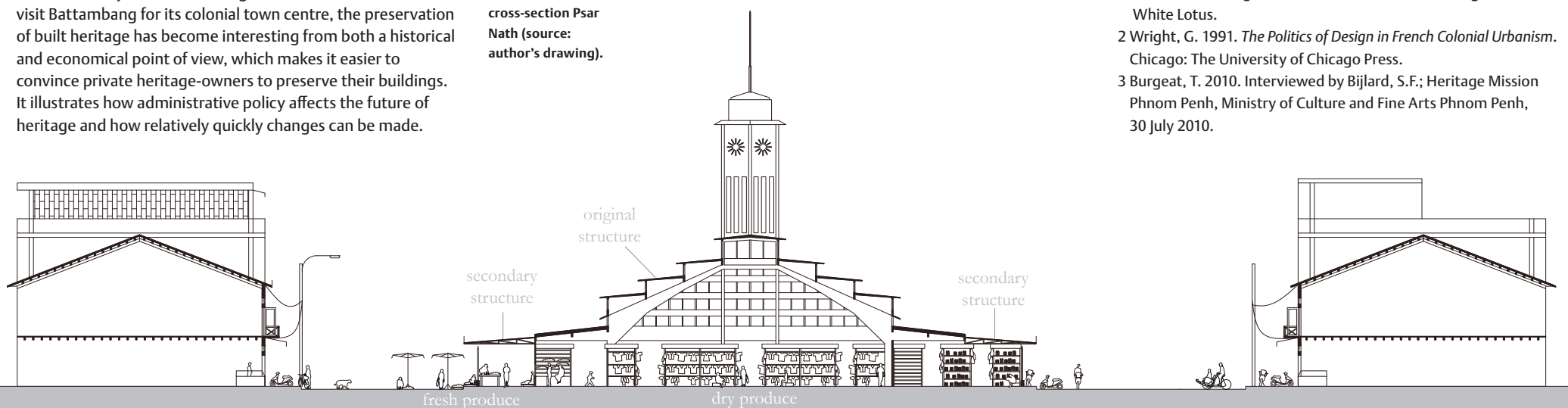
Entering a market in Cambodia reveals a range of stimuli you have probably never experienced before. First of all there are the pungent smells of dried shrimp and squid, of rotten vegetables and freshly grilled meat. But also the shocking sight of live fish being gutted and chopped into pieces, of animal carcasses covered in fat black flies, and of skinned frogs and slithering eels. Vendors, their aprons covered in blood, wield sharp knives and stand in piles of rotting organic waste. Children, barefoot and clothed in rags, pick through the waste in search of anything edible. The heat, already unbearable outside the market, is even denser inside. The aisles are cramped and the kiosks overflow with goods. The markets are clearly as busy as ever, but how do they function today? What is sold inside? Lets take a closer look at the markets of Phnom Penh and Battambang.

Psar Thom Thmei (fig. 5) – 'Big New Market' – lies in the centre of the French commercial area of Phnom Penh and was built between 1935 and 1937. It has always had an up-market quality for Cambodians; it's the grandest and most special Psar. The original structure consists of a 26 meter high dome from which four identical aisles or wings radiate. The main entrance of the market lies to the east, facing the distant Tonlé Sap River. The many grills in the dome and the open plinth provide a constant stream of fresh air. It results in a surprisingly moderate temperature. Daylight is naturally filtered by the grills, casting an ever-changing pattern of shadows on the adjacent walls. Below the large cupola stands a slender column supporting four clocks. Nearest to the column stand shops selling luxury items: watches, gemstones and jewellery. This area is quiet and spacious; vendors leisurely await their customers. In the wings other non-perishable luxurious items are sold: electrical appliances, ready-made clothes, fabrics and tailored clothes. Fresh produce has moved out of the original structure into new large halls, placed at the rear of the original market. The new structures house, in addition to fresh produce, other day-to-day items: shoes, groceries, toiletries, household utensils, clothing and the more ordinary electrical appliances. Temperatures are much less pleasant in these new pavilions than in the original structure; they can rise up to 35 C°, forcing vendors to lie lethargically before well-placed fans, waiting for the intense heat to pass. At primary commercial locations, such as the hall entrances, stalls sell handicrafts and souvenirs. As food is an important part of Cambodian life, snacks and drinks are sold at every location. And equal to the large number of food stalls, is the multitude of shrines; the smell of incense is omnipresent.

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Psar Nath (fig. 6) – 'Meeting Market' – lies in the centre of the French quarter of Battambang and was built in 1937. The market consists of two separate buildings, similar in appearance, but divided from each other by a street. The smaller building lies on the Sangker River and contains the main entrance, marked by a clock tower. In practice,

6: South-North cross-section Psar Nath (source: author's drawing).



however, the entrance that is most commonly used lies at the rear of the market. It is the most active area of the market as it is where the fresh produce is sold; from baskets, buckets, pieces of cloth, banana leaves, and so forth. Vendors sit on stools or squat on the ground for hours at a time. Pieces of cloth and umbrellas provide some shade. At a set of fixed benches – finished with what used to be white tiles – fresh produce is sold for a slightly higher price. Inside the market only non-perishable articles are sold: tinned food, staple food, toiletries, clothing, stationary, shoes, jewellery. There are even hair and nail salons, equipped with Hollywood-style spotlights to provide for both light and some glamour. One would expect a moderate temperature inside the market, as hot air can move out of the roof structure easily. The many stalls, however, seem to block the air current, resulting in a hot and dense interior climate. In the street that separates the two buildings restaurants, which are not much more than a wok burner and some plastic furniture, make food to order. At the foot of the clock tower a small shrine awaits vendors' prayers.

There are many similarities between the two markets. First of all, they are busy as ever. They date from the same period, are made from the same material and share an architectural language. Both markets reveal the difficulties of maintaining the original ventilation system when the market exceeds its original structure. The allocation of goods is similar at both markets; outside at the rear of the original structure is the fresh section, inside only dry goods are sold. *Psar Thom Thmei* is slightly more up-market than the market of Battambang, but in essence both markets cater day-to-day articles to the average Cambodian.

Conclusion

What relevance does architectural heritage have for Cambodia, a country struggling with malnutrition, insufficient health care and inadequate schooling? The answer is obvious and simple: built heritage is a testimony of history and gives a city its identity. Markets reflect Cambodian culture particularly well, as they have been the focal point of society for years and years. So yes, there are clear reasons to preserve the covered markets of Cambodia.

But what has specifically defined the architecture of these markets; what exactly needs to be preserved? To understand the architecture of Cambodia's markets, one has to understand the influence of its tropical climate. Both the pre-colonial and colonial markets reveal its dominance; their architecture would be significantly different were there no torrential rains or stifling temperatures. French colonial rule obviously influenced Cambodia's markets, by formalising the pre-colonial open-air markets with large, concrete halls – a substantial difference from the original makeshift market stalls. They moved the markets away from the river and placed them in the centres of their colonial towns. They adorned them with their architectural ideas. But the French did not have a significant influence upon the functioning of the markets; fresh produce is still sold outside the market, dry inside. Outdoor stalls are still the same as those of the pre-colonial market. Even modern devices such as air-conditioning and refrigeration have made no significant difference. This shows that, in fact, the indigenous market, as an open-air meeting of vendors and customers at an intersection of streets, is what has shaped the markets of today. And it is precisely this odd yet tremendously successful mixture of colonial beliefs and indigenous resilience that makes these markets so unique; that is what should be preserved.

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Notes

- 1 Garnier, F. 1885. "Luang Prabang's Market". *A Pictorial Journey on the Old Mekong; Cambodia, Laos and Yunnan*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- 2 Wright, G. 1991. *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- 3 Burgeat, T. 2010. Interviewed by Bijlard, S.F.; Heritage Mission Phnom Penh, Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts Phnom Penh, 30 July 2010.