

CAMBODIA

Cambodia is principally known for its prestigious site of Angkor, made up of monuments built between the 9th and 13th centuries and including places such as Angkor Wat, the Bayon and Ta Phrom. This immense heritage has been abandoned, neglected during the upheavals of the last 20 years and today requires extensive means for its upkeep and maintenance. However, apart from the Angkorian domain, the knowledge of the actual state of the Khmer heritage is limited and consequently ignored. In addition, Cambodia possesses an important heritage linked to a more recent past.

Angkorian Heritage

Even though the majority of Angkor temples are today protected from looting, other major sites such as the temples of Banteay Chhmar, Preah Khan of Kompong Svay or Koh Ker remain threatened because of their isolation.

At Angkor, the tasks of maintenance, conservation and restoration of monuments represent a considerable amount of work, and require lengthy, drawn-out but also permanent attention. Little by little Cambodia has acquired adequate structures to support this and international help is important, but the task is gigantic.

In spite of all efforts, collapse, sinking and other types of deterioration threatening the preservation of monuments are still relevant today. The primary causes of deterioration are linked to their structural characteristics, combined with the use of fragile materials, and to the impacts of a vigorous climate and vegetation.

The ancillary features, such as the moats and terraces, surrounding walls, the dykes and the reservoirs are also threatened.

Water, which has always played a major role in Cambodia and particularly in the symbolism of temples, is today a deteriorating factor. Despite the monitoring of monuments, the heavy rainfall and the streaming that result from it provoke massive damage. The danger is therefore permanent: each heavy rainfall and gust of wind always makes us fear the worst.

The collapses as well as the recent chaos attract everyone's attention, but those that occurred four or five years previously have now become romantic 'ruins'. The danger of this trivialisation may be serious for the monuments and have unpredictable consequences. Furthermore, Cambodia of today inherits a situation in which the monuments have suffered from a lack of maintenance during the 20-year-long conflict.

The interventions necessary for restoration often resemble rescue interventions, as the degradations are considerable in extent, unexpected and devastatingly spectacular.

The Non-Angkorian Heritage

The following assessment has been established by Mr. Michel Verrot, architect for the Bâtiments de France and head of the project F.S.P. (Fund for Solidarity Priority) of the French Government:

State of knowledge

Out of the Angkor territory and of the 'Angkorian' heritage, the knowledge of the actual state of the Cambodian heritage is limited. There is

- no recent inventory;
- little study of the urban heritage outside of Phnom Penh and



Terraces of the north-west moats in Angkor Vat



Surrounding south-west wall in Angkor Thom

October and November 2001, propping after the collapse of a part of the retaining wall of the first floor, north side of Phnom Bakheng



Siem Reap, and hardly any exhaustive study on vernacular architecture;

- no or little attempt to place matters in perspective.

The level of recognition

The ignorance of the non-Angkorian heritage is manifest in:

- the demolition or alteration of civil monumental complexes characteristic of the periods of Cambodian history
- the demolition or the excessive restoration of temples and communal rooms of Buddhist monasteries throughout the country
- the increase of stolen objects of Buddhist heritage (wooden sculptures, doors, etc.) – 52% of listed cases are in the Angkor region.

The urban heritage

The cultural heritage and particularly the architectural heritage of Cambodia is not limited to temples and construction of the Angkorian time.

Cambodia has inherited architecture from the colonial times worthy of interest as it illustrates by its style a recent phase of the country's history. It has been subject to limited study only, except within the cities of Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. Little considered and mostly unknown, this heritage is gradually being destroyed. Entire houses are demolished, homogeneous complexes are disfigured by modern constructions without character.

The vernacular architecture suffers equally from ignorance and disregard. Until now, it has not been the subject of exhaustive study, although this heritage reveals a long tradition of builders and masters in the art of roof structure and woodwork. A few examples still remain but the wooden roof structures have a tendency to be replaced by steel, the walls by cement, and tile or thatch roofs are abandoned and replaced by corrugated iron or fibro-cement.

The Buddhist heritage

The Buddhist religion is particularly important in Cambodia; it unites the rural and urban communities in one sacred place with multiple functions: the temple. A temple in one context is the architectural reflection of dedications to Buddha. Its different elements, including furniture and architecture, are therefore particularly well looked after. However, this heritage, sometimes ancient, is little known. The temples and the communal rooms of Buddhist monasteries are destroyed or are the object of excessive restoration throughout the country.

Patrimonial tendencies

Whether it is architecture of the Buddhist heritage or colonial architecture, the analysis of existing practices and intentions tends to demonstrate that the question of cost is not major. In fact, numerous temples have been reconstructed, at great expense through the donations of faithful followers, after the destruction of old monuments considered to be dilapidated. Similarly, considerable means are used to 'beautify' without regard to urban buildings in a way that corresponds to little more than façadism with the intention of giving a 'khmerising' character to the ensemble.

In addition, arguments relating to physical remains conceal

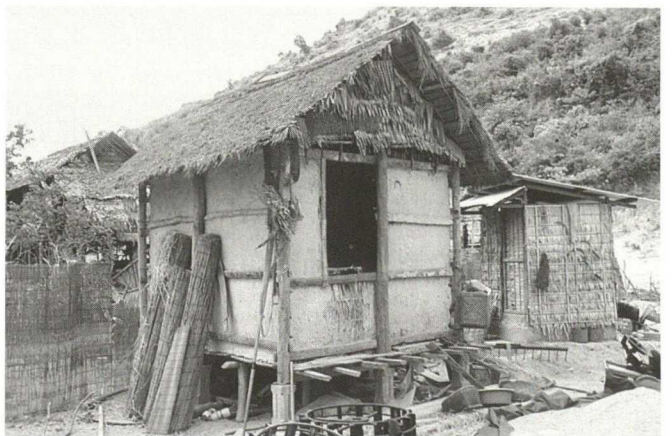


Particular house in Battambang



Guardrail, house in Battambang

Rice loft at the foot of Phnom Krom, Siemreap province





Particular house in Siemreap



Vat Damnak, Siemreap

existing and important socio-cultural obstacles: the notion of 'heritage' is not familiar and, as a result, the notion of conservation-restoration is absent from decision-making criteria. A religious building that is dilapidated is unworthy of its function and, hence, does not deserve to be preserved. In other words, the purpose of an object and its religious function take precedence over the object itself. For the moment it is very unlikely that restoration could give the monument sufficient splendour for it to completely fulfil its propitiatory role.

Finally, it is obvious that we are today contributing to the disappearance of traditional knowledge and practice. We know how to demolish so as to rebuild, employing techniques and modern materials (cement, tiles, sheet metal, steel) but we no longer know how to restore the old works. Thus, old painting and lacquering techniques are also forgotten.

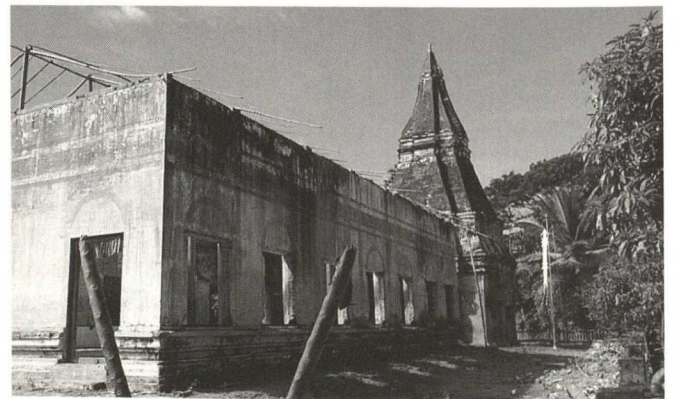
The threats to the site of Angkor, whatever their nature and scale, are increasing daily. The lack of understanding and inability to address this problem in all its dimensions is astounding. It is of vital importance that all concerned groups are made fully aware of this fact and that all work in synergy with a common goal. This will facilitate a more rapid and timely achievement of the necessary work.

With respect to the colonial and post-colonial heritage, including religious places, the pervading ignorance condemns them to certain destruction or to hazardous transformation. Phnom Penh, Kampot, Kompong Cham, and Battambang – to cite just a few cities – are inexorably losing their wealth. Only at Siem Reap, the gateway to Angkor, has there been a realisation generated by the overwhelming mass of tourists. To some extent, this has allowed an escape from this phenomenon. So although efforts are taken, it is necessary to provide guidance, encouragement and supervision in order to make Cambodia aware of the inestimable wealth of its architectural heritage, an integral part of its identity and its culture.

ICOMOS Cambodia



Vat Damnak, Siemreap



Vat Chedei, destruction of the pagoda, province of Siemreap

Vat Bo, Siemreap

