Two Case Studies
Iconic New Khmer Architecture Buildings

National Theater
Phnom Penh, Cambodia
1968/designed by Vann Molyvann
2008/demolished

National Sports Complex
Phnom Penh, Cambodia
1964/designed by Vann Molyvann
2015/placed on World Monuments Fund Watch List


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The Preah Suramarit National Theater (often referred to as the Bassac Theater), designed by Vann Molyvann and inaugurated in 1968, formed the centerpiece of a massive 1960s riverfront development project on the Tonle Bassac riverfront in Phnom Penh. The project included cultural, residential, and civic structures to represent the government’s effort to recreate the image of Phnom Penh as the Pearl of Asia - the cultural and political capital that it was during the 1950s and 1960s following independence from France.

Built on the reclaimed banks of the river, the theater was designed to resemble a ship from the exterior. The building's peaked pyramid roof over the main stage and flat split level design for seating were inspired by American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. In an era before air conditioning the building was positioned and designed, as with all works by Vann Molyvann, to ventilate naturally through the course of the day and evenings.

The theater was one of Vann Molyvann’s most accomplished buildings and quickly became a landmark structure in modern Phnom Penh, known for its wide stage and excellent acoustics for Cambodian drama and musicals. The main theater space was designed so that every seat was close enough to the stage that audience members could see the movements of the dancer’s feet—a critical element of traditional Khmer Dance. Before Pol Pot, at least 300 artists were professionally engaged at the theater to give regular performances of classic and folk dance, opera, spoken theater, acrobatics, and live music.

As the city of Phnom Penh recovered from the political unrest and chaos of the 1970s and 1980s, the National Theater was renovated only to be severely damaged by fire in 1994. After the fire, the burned-out shell as well as undamaged sections of the theater lobby continued to be used by artists as studio, rehearsal, and performance space. Despite years of effort by the Royal family to raise funds for the repair and preservation of the building, the government sold the land underneath the
theater in 2008 to a local developer who demolished the structure, evicted the artists, and cleared the site. The developer has been renting portions of the property to businessmen and organizations for a variety of uses including a private football field, night market, and restaurant/nightclub.

Many have mourned the destruction of the theater as a blow to Cambodia’s heritage. One architecture student at the Royal University of Fine Arts said that the theater was a source of pride and inspiration to students and young professional architects as it exemplified the kind of creativity that is currently lacking from much of the new structures being built in Phnom Penh today, especially designs that are both modern and uniquely Khmer in style.

“It was 25 years ago in 1982 when I and my schoolmates were lucky enough to come to the Bassac Theater at the riverfront south of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh and see the early traditional arts performances after the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed. Though we had little knowledge or feeling of a national pride as teenagers, we were proud enough to see the impressive theater and its marvelous beauty. Surrounded by a spacious garden of blooming frangipani and other flowers, the theater was a really good place to relax and enjoy oneself. Below the staircase leading to the upper floor, we watched the golden and silver fish swimming in a pool and dancing to the music inside the auditorium.”

*Local citizen commentary in the Phnom Penh Post, Issue 17 / 01, January 11 – 23, 2008*
The National Sports Complex is the most iconic example of the New Khmer Architecture and is considered by many to be architect Vann Molyvann’s masterpiece, noted for its thoughtful, creative use of natural elements and celebration of ancient Khmer forms. The plinth and elevation of the main structure and even the pools beneath the grandstands were modeled on the elevation of Angkorian temples and their ponds. His design was widely hailed as a classic example of the synthesis of traditional Khmer and modern architectures.

The complex, completed in 1964, originally occupied a large site in central Phnom Penh surrounded by several acres of games courts and playing fields. The complex has seating for a total of approximately 100,000 people in both indoor and outdoor stadiums, and in around an Olympic size swimming pool. The entire complex featured a system of artificial lakes and canals that served to cool the site and provide a system of flood water management.

In the 1960s, the stadium became a political focal point for the country – a symbol of Cambodia’s modernization and rise to international notice after independence, hosting political rallies that were impressive demonstrations of intense nationalism. Vann Molyvann designed the complex to reflect his ideas for fashioning a distinctly Khmer style from the modern architecture he admired. He drew his inspiration from the temples at Angkor, though not from its iconography but in its fundamentals. The complex’s arrangement on an east-west axis mirrors the more symmetrical array of buildings at Angkor.
During the decades of political chaos in Cambodia with the outbreak of civil war in 1970, the ensuing Khmer Rouge regime of 1975-1979, and occupation by Vietnam from 1979-1986, little attention was paid to the sports complex and it survived intact. Since the late 1980s, however, it has become a favorite spot for sports and recreational activities. In 2000 a private Taiwanese company received permission from the Cambodian government to redevelop the western edge of the complex to construct a shopping mall. In 2012, the northern third of the site was cleared and all of the lakes and canals were filled in by the Overseas Cambodian Investment Corporation to make way for a giant condominium and shopping development called “Olympia City.” These developments have gradually whittled away much of the original site.

Today, the remaining fields and stadium structures serve as one the few open public places in a city of over 2 million people. While the shadows of the rising construction are already beginning to overpower this iconic space, the complex continues to exist as a persistently lived in structure. Despite the fact that there are few organized sporting events, on any given day, hundreds of local people - amateur athletes, small businesses, young families, and others – use the complex for morning runs, afternoon soccer matches, after work aerobic exercise and dancing, kite flying and picnics. While the nation has changed drastically since the 1960s, this New Khmer Architecture style complex has become an invaluable benchmark for regaining a sense of the society that was lost.

In October 2015 the National Sports Complex was placed on the World Monuments Fund Watch List as an “iconic symbol of the massive post-independence effort that transformed Cambodia from an agrarian colony into a modern state. … (The complex) is used daily by Phnom Penh residents for recreation and social gatherings, and yet there are mounting fears of encroachment and loss of space as a community asset. Its inclusion on the 2016 Watch advocates for shifts in policy that recognize heritage as a positive component of urban development. …Watch-listing provides an opportunity for sites and their nominators to raise public awareness, foster local participation, advance innovation and collaboration, and demonstrate effective solutions.”