

Balancing Heritage Preservation and Redevelopment in Cambodia

The Case of Battambang

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Urban heritage conservation is an important yet neglected task in Cambodia. Currently, the international community and the government concentrate only on the ancient temples of Angkor, largely ignoring the urban heritage in the country's cities and towns.

By doing so, they are missing out an important opportunity. Not only does integrated urban heritage conservation preserve the cultural dimension of a city's history, it can also contribute to the overall effort of poverty reduction through its potential for economic development, especially in the tourism and service sectors.

To achieve this, cultural heritage preservation must be harmonized with the changes necessitated by social and economic development, and it must be based on community participation and local understanding.



Photo below: Source unknown; photo left: Alex Buntzel





Rapid urbanization and modernization in Cambodia, like in other countries in the region, is increasingly putting pressure on urban land use for commercial purposes and investment. This is most evident in the capital, Phnom Penh, but is also the case in secondary towns and cities where much of the country's urban heritage is located. Land prices in these locations are very high and easily encourage land owners to sell their properties. State land with heritage buildings in prime locations is given to developers in exchange for new public facilities at less valuable locations. Further, small business and shop owners from core areas are increasingly investing in their properties for the sake of modernity. Inappropriate renovation and modernistic "facelifting" of traditional buildings thus contribute a lot to the destruction of the appearance and character of heritage areas. The lack of regulations at national level and of a legal framework on conservation, and the fact that heritage owners and decision makers alike seem to give little consideration to the value of heritage buildings, mean the survival of Cambodia's urban heritage is largely doubtful.

Overcoming these issues is key for the sustainable management of urban heritage in the future. Despite the ongoing rapid transformation and widespread loss of heritage substance, there are many cities and towns in Cambodia where urban heritage is still in a fair condition and worthy of preservation. Among them is Battambang – the second-largest city in Cambodia with a population of about 142.000. The city has developed rapidly in recent years with numerous new investments and a great deal of construction activity. However, the inner city is still characterized by a largely coherent ensemble of about 800 heritage buildings. Its urban layout and heritage clearly illustrates the 150 years of urban history from Thai control through the French protectorate era to the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* period of Cambodia's independence under King *Norodom Sihanouk*. Battambang has been a pilot city for administrative reform within the national Decentralization and Deconcentration Policy since 2001. Since 2004 it has the right to set up its own Master Plan, which has led to the development of an integrated spatial de-

velopment plan for the city territory. Throughout the work on the Master Plan it became clear that the intrinsic value of the varied urban heritage of Battambang forms a huge asset for the development of the city. Following a baseline study in 2008, a preservation zone covering the historical shophouse quarter was defined and laid down in the Municipal Master Plan 2020, and the initiative "Our City – Our Heritage" was launched by the administration. The overall goal of the initiative is to preserve and safeguard the unique character and authenticity of the diverse built heritage of Battambang City. Measures and activities undertaken so far, aim at enhancing the recognition of existing cultural heritage resources by means of surveys, classification and regulations; at consulting and supporting the local communities to raise their awareness and acknowledgement of heritage conservation; at developing consciousness and capacity at the relevant authorities/administrative bodies on the local level; and finally at developing new business opportunities and local income through tourism and supporting appropriate adaptive re-

use of heritage buildings. Despite a first track record of successful activities carried out, such as the piloted restoration of the 'Provincial Hall' and the accomplishment of a major awareness campaign involving various government agencies, households, schools and the private sector, there is still a long way to go. However, with the effort and long-term commitment of all stakeholders Battambang could possibly become a future role model for a local approach to integrated heritage conservation management in Cambodia. As shown, such an integrated initiative should form part of a comprehensive urban development strategy and be linked to other development initiatives aimed at meeting the basic needs of the urban population. If urban heritage can be preserved for new economically viable developments such as tourism and tourism services, integrated heritage management could contribute to the overall effort to combat urban poverty, fostering not only the progress of historical districts, but the collective advancement of the larger urban population as a whole.

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