

# Between Mobility and Immobility: Traffic and Public Space in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Thomas Kolnberger

*Abstract: The city of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, is a particularly interesting case study metropolis for an urban structure reformation process. The Pol Pot-regime forcefully evicted Cambodia's urban population in 1975, leaving the capital a 'ghost-city' for years. Phnom Penh had then to reboot its urban life after the Vietnamese expelled the Khmer Rouge from the city in 1979. For nearly three decades, urban space has been reorganised mainly as a self-organised process by the neo-city dwellers. The widely open use of public space as a multiple-purpose surface for transportation, economic activities or as a place for leisure has recently become contested by the state authorities. Buildings and road systems are the material basis of a city. Constructional arrangements constitute spaces and regulate or limit their use. Accordingly, public space is a hybrid of built and mobile environments with fluid social delineation and fluctuating official allocation. On the basis of historical evidence, states around the world have eagerly assigned themselves the role of arbiter regarding these contested areas in-between the private and the public sphere since the 'age of modernisation'. The (re)rise of state power in Cambodia gives an example of reshuffling urban space and demarcating it in separate spheres by traffic regulations which are implicitly performative and demonstrative acts.*

*This paper is based on participatory observation, interviews with policy makers of the Municipality of Phnom Penh (MPP) and various inhabitants of the capital.*

**Key Words:** Phnom Penh; traffic; transportation; public space

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Mobility is the state of being in motion and transport is the movement of people, animals and goods, which requires infrastructure: it forms – together with buildings – the material basis of a city. Such constructional arrangements constitute spaces and regulate or limit their use. Accordingly, public space is always a hybrid of built and mobile environments with fluid social delineation and fluctuating official allocation. On the basis of historical evidence, states around the world have eagerly assigned themselves the role of arbiter regarding these contested areas in-between the private and the public sphere. They follow a paradigm of governance by interfering in full or semi self-organised 'grey' fields – like Phnom Penh's traffic.

Source: Helmut Schneider 2008



## Traffic in Phnom Penh as grey areas of public space

The city traffic of Phnom Penh is a constant astonishment for first-time visitors. Googling the key words “Phnom Penh” and “traffic” produces over 8.7 million results (compared to 9.6 for Bangkok or 24.0 for Ho Chi Minh-City). Most of them – in words or with images – refer to the seemingly chaotic traffic or the anarchic character of driving; a mixture of social conformity and chaotic individualism. Everything one needs to know about Phnom Penh’s city society can be found in the traffic: Tongue-in-cheek, some observers even attribute the smooth rhythm of mutual accommodating movements of pedestrians and vehicles of all kind to meditation:

“One of the main ways Khmers in Phnom Penh practice their Buddhism is by subjecting themselves to traffic. The constant near-misses, last minute swerves, precarious balancing acts, and obstacle-course road conditions would put the average person into a stress seizure. Yet the locals remain unperturbed, which is why the no-system traffic system works.”

(Asma, 2006, 15)

There is even a special internet forum in English which deals with traffic related issues in Cambodia and its practical intricacies and legal inconsistencies for foreigners and locals (see: <http://crossingcambodia.blogspot.com>).

A second common visitor perception is the widespread use of the streets, its sidewalks, and a ‘grey area’ beyond the road curb for non-traffic use. Those activities can be summed up as “pavement economy” (Forbes, 1996, 62): hawking of street vendors, business transactions of street stalls, the open air construction and assembling work, storing items, drying agriculture products, and – most prominently – the display of goods and services for sale to passers-by.

Traditionally, the urban street united three physical functions, “that of circulation, that of public space, and that of built frontage” (Marshall, 2005, 6-7), creating an unenclosed realm which provides essential common goods: visibility and (temporary) proximity as a movement space for social interaction. In Cambodia *dae leeng* (to walk around, “to prome-



Crowded streets in Phnom Penh

nade”, Derks, 2008, 143 or Saphan 2007, 251f.), to be in the public eye in order to see and be seen or slowly cruising on a motorbike along the built frontage to spot friends, entertainment or other opportunities are favourite ways of prospecting interface and contact.

The ongoing process of deconstruction and separation of this spatial complex in legally constitutive elements of its own marks is – in the words of Stephen Marshall – a general “schism of modernism”:

“The result was that street design became subsumed within the rather specialised discipline of road design – based on the scientific consideration of traffic flow and the kinetics of vehicular motion, practised by engineers trained in hydraulics and mechanics, rather than architects trained in spatial form and aesthetics, or planners versed in the arts of the public realm.” (Marshall, 2005, 7)

In an uneven global process whereby space has become more and more regulated and commodified, such spatial schisms of modernisation became indicators for more state control as traffic engineering is closely associated with urban planning and social control.

Today Phnom Penh is like a historical window to observe original multiple-use streets in action. However, this window of opportunity is being progressively shut following a modernist paradigm, defined by technical, social and political strategies.

## Implementing a modernist traffic paradigm

1) Technically the dominant roads-and-traffic-driven approach ranks – in a discriminating order of preference – motorised private transport of 4-wheels over 2-wheels, far above non-motorised transport systems and pedestrians. A narrative of progress justifies the implementation of a disentangled spatialisation of traffic zones.

In the West, this shift has led to the reorganisation of streetscapes in two steps. Keeping the streets open for circulation and ensuring fire security emerged as central steering issues for urban development. In times of accelerating urbanisation, roughly since the second half of the 19th century, laws regulating building lines (alignment) and the hygienic debate became a catalyst for enforcing law and order on the streets. In the case of Phnom Penh these urban concepts were transferred from France to colonial Indochina (Rabinow, 1989). The French overseas’ archives in Aix-en-Provence (Archives nationales d’Outre-mer) and the National Archives of Cambodia store hold a plethora of files providing information about the constant struggle of the colonial authorities for to enforce a civilised and modern rule in the public space (read: streets). Some cases seem like déjà-vus of the current situation (i.e. rural roads and strategic corridors, see: Del Testa, 1999; Edwards, 2006). This seemingly exaggerated care for proper street use had a hidden agenda. It can be viewed as a performative act that the colonial administration would show force and display a higher profile at comparable

Source (also of picture on page 2 above): Jan Peter Mund 2008



Marriage tent on the street

low cost to enhance its authority. At the same time automobiles became the ‘motor barouches’ of the colonial (white) upper class displaying the social order en passant.<sup>1</sup>

In a second step, the increase in motorisation after World War II has reinforced the development of streetscapes. Functional zoning, intervention in the city fabric and more road traffic regulations were implemented to ban congestion, the *bête noire* of any city administration.

Ironically, the car itself became the major self-congesting factor. In 2011, Phnom Penh has no public transportation system. The public mobility is served by a myriads of motorbikes (motodub, motorcycle taxi) and tuk-tuks (tri-wheel motor rickshaws) and motorcycles with trailers (remorque), and occasionally *cyclo-pousse* (bike rickshaws, pedicabs); cab services have recently been established. However, this highly effective decentralised service is progressively tailbacked and tailgated by automobiles. Since the late 1990s bike rickshaws-owners have been threatened to be legally banned from city traffic for being too slow and forming a moving hindrance to other participants (Etherington & Simon, 1996), which would further diminish the chance for making a living for some hundred transport providers.

In Phnom Penh car driving is still the exception to the predominant motorbike traffic and to own a car a privilege. Thus, car drivers parade superiority via their vehicles, usually expensive SUVs or 4-wheel-drive pickups. Their mano-

euving is a conspicuous consumption of space and any parking in front of expensive restaurants or offices becomes an eye-catching ritual accompanied by dramatic gestures of the parking attendant/security personnel, who get a small tip with a likewise generous gesture of the holder. In Cambodia’s culture of impunity – if one has *mien knong* (“to have back”, to have connections) – the illegal parking on the second lane is often secured by displaying deterring IDs of high rank in the military, government or administration in the front screen. Demonstrating one’s position or wealth is an easy way to put pressure on other people. The pecking order on the street is reflecting the social power relations, and *nek thom* (“big” influential men) are behind the steering wheel. Successively the need for parking space is also displacing the pavement economy of the urban poor while any safe walking corridors for pedestrians get more and more blocked by cars (Saphan, 2007, 238ff).

2) Socially, the modernist paradigm is putting an end to the legal limbo on the streets, which has accrued organically from the pragmatic use of the public space after the fall of the Pol Pot-regime in 1979/80. It is a process of disassembling the multi-use space that was often used as a temporary public zone. Tim Edensor (1998) has been observing this shift to logocentric spatialisation in India since the 1990s. The example of Ho Chi Minh City metropolitan region is like a preview for a Cambodia to come:

“Put simply, a significant segment of

Vietnam’s rising propertied class benefits from the government’s efforts to strictly demarcate public and private space, and the language of civilization operates as a substitute language of property relations that enforces an increasingly strict differentiation of public space from private. [...] As property became increasingly privatized and commoditized during this period, blurred boundaries between private and public space became less tenable for propertied interests seeking to demarcate their private spaces”

(Harms, 2009, 186; for Hanoi: Kürten, 2008).

Whereas a kind of modified multi-purpose street and simplified streetscapes have mounted a comeback in post-modern traffic engineering (Quimby & Castle, 2006), the MPP disentangles the street to get under control a second *bête noire* under control: unregulated fluctuation and mobility, which for other users is a mobile asset of temporality. In his case study of Padang, Indonesia, Freek Colombijn (1994, 303f.) points to the importance of the temporary use of public space. He distinguishes four different modalities: political manifestations, traffic, recreation and the informal sector. However, temporary sites and activities, which are essential fundamentals of the pavement economy, smear preconceived notions of ownership and property. They continually dissolve the distinction between private and public by fluctuation, which the modernist paradigm aims at stopping by demanding and supporting an indoorisation (Harms, 2009) and legal regulation of activities. A middle-term objective of the MPP is to assign everything to its proper fixed place and to end ‘anarchy’ – the favourite explanatory statement of Cambodian officials for unpopular measures.

3) Depoliticising the street is the third pillar of the paradigm. To seize – or in the words of Simon Springer “the assault on public space” (2010, 132) – via traffic regulations is a sublime way of appropriation. “Roads become an ideological space” – as Terry McGee puts it, depicting a general trend in South-east Asian cities – “in which ideas are contested”. They are part of the “disciplining of space that is associated with modernity” (McGee, 2002, 649). The eviction of ‘illegal’ and ‘chaotic’ informal settlements is only one part of the spatial reconstruction in Phnom Penh (see also: Schneider, 2011), while

the beautification programme of the city, launched by Kep Chuktema, the capital's appointed governor since 2003, deepens the ongoing spatial division by separating space for meeting and recreation from the street (Springer, 2010, 108ff.). Traffic and amusement are to be separated as any officially approved protest is restricted to certain areas only. Since the inauguration of the 'Freedom Park/Democratic Corner' in 2010, protest in public is limited to a 12,000 square meter wide area close to the massive US Embassy. The MPP will not give in to the pressure of the crowds on the street anymore, and sites where the 'voice from below' can materialise in space are rolled back. Especially the waterfront and riverside of Phnom Penh became clear-swept and are now an expanding show-case green zone with public parks. This initiative is highly acclaimed but also represents a further step towards taming the city population by making the city space as transparent as possible. These spatial politics are in sharp contrast to the in-transparent opacity of the traffic regulations and the lacking enforcement of traffic safety recommendations (see the CLTL, 2006).

### A graphical synopsis

Public space is not a 'container space' with spatially designated areas alone, separating the public from the private. It might be a certain physical area; however a public area is spatially more relational than an entity with binary character might suggest: it is a question of access to a certain catchment area, representing personal zones of interest in common with others. It emerges as an overlapping area of possible (physical) contact points. Therefore, public spaces, past and present, attest a certain common mode of production. An open visibility, walkability, and talkability represents the aggregated sum of individual radiuses of spatial convergence. A 'public radius', which can be supported or prevented by the built environment or which can be supported or impeded by law – especially in a process of reformation.

After the Khmer Rouge cataclysm, people themselves were the important infrastructure in Phnom Penh:

*"In other words, their selves, situations, and bodies bear the responsibility for articulating different loca-*



Source: Thomas Kolnberger 2011

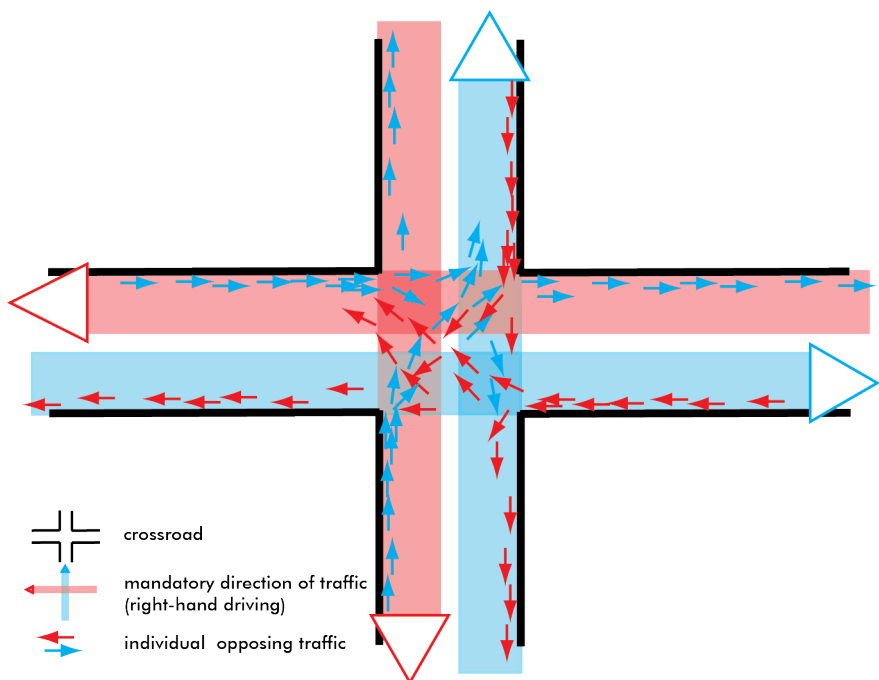
### Pavement economy

*tions, resources, and stories into viable opportunities for everyday survival"* (Simone, 2010, 124).

Due to the forced self-organisation for survival, the moveable public space of the new Phnom Penhais turned out to be their most valuable asset. The walkability, talkability, and visibility of the city was high, nearly unimpeded, and collectively used as a common-

pool resource. Phnom Penh's streets bears witness of this self-organised mobile public space ever since. The first figure (Fig. 1) demonstrates the flexible, yet sufficient traffic arrangement as a spontaneous order.

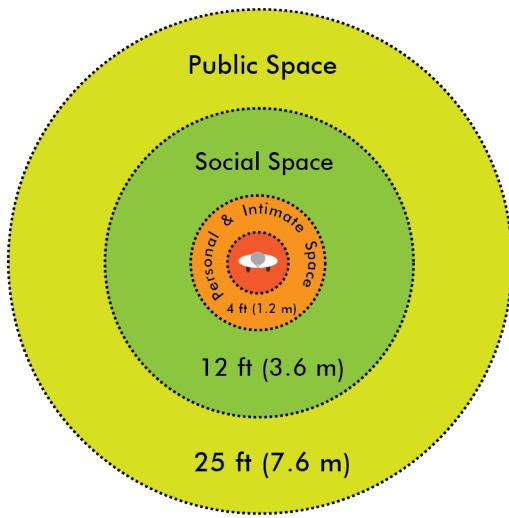
According to Edward T. Hall (1963), social distance between people sets measurable distances between them. These correlations with physical distance from intimate and personal



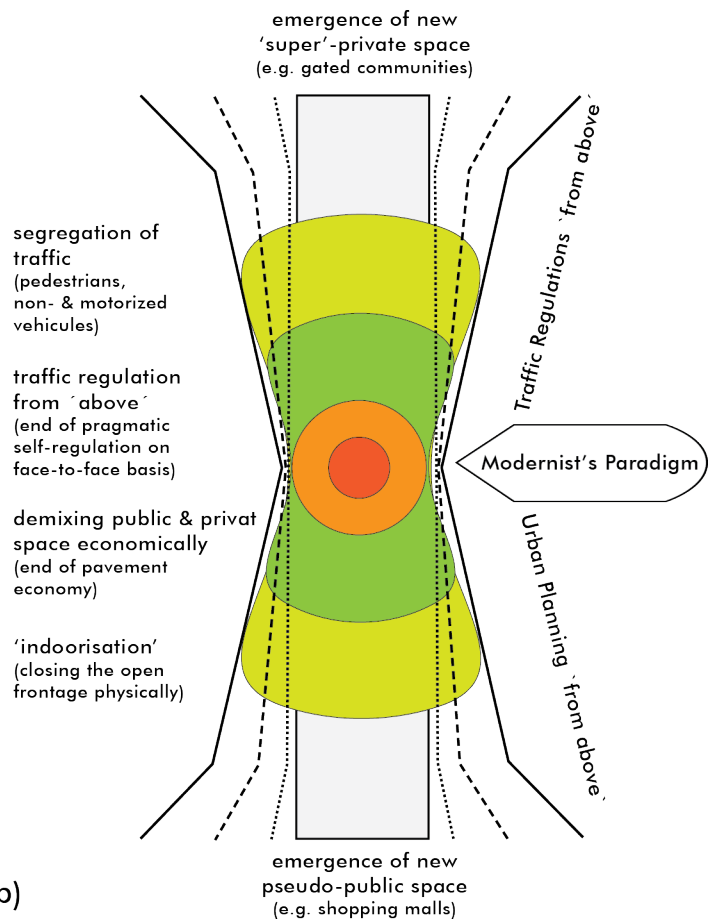
Source: Thomas Kolnberger 2011

Fig. 1: First interface: warp and weft; Phnom Penh's city traffic flow is changing from uncongested stable flows, where vehicles can drive chaotically at a speed compliant to a city's environment, and where individuals (even pedestrians) are able to move in and out of the lanes smoothly, to an unstable regime of stop-and-go traffic. The infrastructure (traffic lights, traffic signs etc.) of the moving public space becomes tailor-made for more cars transporting less people and claiming more space per transport unit. This development has repercussions on the second interface: the sidewalks. Stationary traffic is displacing the pavement economy.

Source: (a) Thomas Kohberger based on E.T. Hall (1966); (b) own draft



(a)



(b)

Fig. 2 a&b: Changing proxemics: the re-formation of the moveable public space by traffic and urban planning regulations from above. The capitalistic modernist's paradigm restricts "commons" and opens up forms of (controlled) interactive space at the same time, but not for all at the same level of accessibility.

to public distance (between 12 to 25 feet and beyond) are concentric. Various impacts to reduce this moveable radius (reaction bubbles) are restricting potential interactions and possible alternative solutions for, e.g. traffic congestions or the efficient use of rare open (fixed and unbuilt) public space in a city. The conventional modernist's paradigm focuses on enhancing (a) fixed-feature space (immobiles, such as walls or territorial boundaries); (b) unbalancing semi-fixed-feature space (this comprises movable objects, such as vehicles) in favour of emblematic winners of modernisation like car drivers by (c) discriminating and channeling informal space (the personal space

around the body, that travels with a person).<sup>2</sup>

**Conclusion**

Historically, the modernist traffic paradigm has followed the rational planning model from above with a set of policy blueprints for auto-centric transportation designs. One of its legacies is the separation of pedestrians and traffic in segregated zones, where planners had not (fully) considered the social or economic factors that could lead to urban decay of pavement activities. The spatial organisation of society and its planning processes are thus directly related to its class structuring. In Phnom Penh this spatial New

Deal creates a development, but at the expense of the environment and the poor. The spatial organisation of society and its planning processes are thus directly related to its class structuring. It is about the access to resources and the city's most valuable common one – urban space – is in short supply. In economics, common goods (or common-pool resources) are defined as a type of good which is rivalrous (the consumption by one person precludes other persons) and non-excludable (a person cannot be excluded from consumption of the goods). In the last decade, a clear shift from a common character of space to a privatised one is discernable. The temporary use of space in Phnom Penh will be more and more limited; precluding urban poor, micro-entrepreneurs, etc. from the consumption. The "street" as a common good is being primarily re-dedicated to motorised (private car) traffic.

To be fair: the MPP as any other town administration has to cope with the rising demand of a motor-minded society, with the increasing urban population, technical as well as financial

Source: MPP census 2008

Small truck (pick-up)	Heavy trucks (HGV)	Minibus	Motor-coach	Car	Motorbike	Tuk-Tuk	Bike
2,779	1,284	1,259	513	36,870	176,869	941	65,725

Tab. 1: Current Modes of Transportation in Phnom Penh (total numbers of officially registered/ counted vehicles). According to data of the Department of Land Transport, the total accumulated number of registered motorised vehicles in Cambodia over a 13 years period from 1990 to 2003 was 64,805 cars and 336,502 motorcycles only. The comparison with the number of cars registered in 2008 in the MPP alone illustrates the sharp rise of motorisation (ADB-ASEAN, 2003).

challenges, and it has to please investors (see Tab. 1: Current Modes of Transportation in Phnom Penh). However, fair governance implies that rules and mechanisms function in a way that allows the executives to respect the rights and interests of all stakeholders. The top-down methods of the state bureaucracy in Phnom Penh favour the rich, the ‘emblem of progress’, which reflects the changing political terms of trade. During the civil war and its aftermath, governance especially in the capital had to reconcile all interests, but on the low economic level of a poor state, struggling for the alliance and allegiance of the common people. By necessity, subsistence was makeshift and the use of the city space provisional and used collectively. After the consolidation of the ruling regime in the late 1990s a new political economy has been replacing the old silent consensus (Roberts, 2001; Gottesman, 2002; Hughes, 2003). The changing appearance of Phnom Penh’s streets is like a tracer for this recent development in political culture.

## Endnote

[1] As a footnote to history, the general ban of right-hand drive vehicles in Vietnam can be seen as a reaction to the “arrogant” behaviour of tourists from Thailand, putting a stop to the excursions organised in the early 1990s by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) to the former French colonies, using 4WD vehicles as “Friendship Caravan to Indochina”. Cambodia’s similar ban of 2001 was, however, primarily targeting smuggled stolen cars from Thailand. It entailed costly changes of the steering columns of 80% of the cars officially registered in Cambodia at that time, according to General Director of Transport. Retrieved August 2011 from <http://ipsnews.net/mekong/stories/overload.html>.

[2] See: Edwart T. Hall (1963) and Bryan Lawson (2001); the technical terms are all taken from here.

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Thomas Kolnberger, IPSE - Identités.Politique.Sociétés.Espaces, FLSHASE, Université du Luxembourg, Luxembourg, Campus Walferdange, Route de Diekirch (B.P.2), L-7201 Walferdange / Luxembourg, Email: [thomas.kolnberger@uni.lu](mailto:thomas.kolnberger@uni.lu)