

PLAYING WITH POWERS:
THE POLITICS OF ART IN NEWLY INDEPENDENT CAMBODIA¹

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From its centers, the Cold War was - and is - often thought of in absolutes of opposition: the capitalist “free world” versus the communist world, abstraction versus social realism, us versus them. For newly independent countries on the periphery of the ideological conflict, choosing sides was untenable, and Cambodia under Sihanouk was particularly forceful in its articulation of a third way: neutrality. For many geo-political reasons, Cambodia became a major battleground in Cold War competitions to win “hearts and minds.” This paper considers a few of the effects of Cold War aid and influence on visual culture in 1950s and 1960s Cambodia.

During the 1950s and 1960s, films, performers, exhibits, magazines, and books flooded into Cambodia from both sides of the Cold War in an ever escalating competition to “inform” and “influence.”² Through the capillary imagination of panicked powers, distribution and “penetration” were emphasized. Even remote areas of the Cambodian countryside were treated to screenings of films such as “Life on a Kansas Farm,” “May Day in Peking,” and “Sputnik”

¹ Ingrid submitted this paper to the panel entitled “The Colonization of Everydayness: Cold War Histories” of the Annual Conference of the College Art Association (CAA), Atlanta, February 2005. The paper was read in her absence at the conference. Although, thanks to panel conveners Jelena Stojanovic and Anna Botta, we were able to obtain all of the images accompanying this presentation, these were not of publication quality; nor were they sourced or dated. Many of the CAA images appear, however, in Ingrid’s thesis, such that the CAA collection served as a guide in selecting images from the thesis for reproduction here. Additional higher quality versions of images sent to the CAA were located by Reyum staff in their office databases, and kindly provided to us. (Eds.)

² “Inform” and “influence” are Charlotte Beers’ terms. Speech by the former Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at The Citadel on October 17, 2002.

through the mobile “cinecar” programs of various competing powers (Figures 1 and 2). The richly illustrated magazine *Free World* (Figure 3), translated into Khmer and distributed for free by the US Information Service to 70,000 Cambodian readers by the end of the 1950s, introduced its audience to a wide range of topics including a pictorial account of the experiences of a Thai student studying painting at the Pratt Art Institute of New York, and visiting the Native American collections of the Brooklyn Museum (Figures 4a and b).³ Traveling exhibitions brought photo displays such as “Space Unlimited,” “Sports in the USA,” “20th Century Highlights of American Painting,” and “Life in America” (See Figure 6 in “States of Panic...” in the present volume) to Cambodian provincial centers, while Marian Anderson, the Czechoslovakian Dance Troupe, the Russian Ballet and the Jubilee Singers performed on Cambodian stages, all courtesy of the propaganda services of States aligned on both sides of the Cold War.

Local consumption of this influx of images, performers, and information did not necessarily conform to the intended aims of the disseminators. Whereas the



Figure 1: United States Information Service Cinecar mobile public address unit, Cambodia 1958. (US National Archives at College Park, Maryland, RG286 CAM-58-606)



Figure 2: Training Course in Phnom Penh on the operation, repair and maintenance of film projectors sponsored by US aid for the Cinecar project, 1957. (US National Archives at College Park, Maryland, RG286 CAM-57-1014)

³ This particular article, as many others in the admittedly propagandistic magazine, were meant to display the supposed diversity of American culture during the ongoing civil rights movement, thus counteracting Soviet efforts to focus on racial segregation and class antagonisms in the United States. In other work, I am considering representations of American culture and race in the materials put out by the United States Information Service during the 1950s.



Figure 3: Free World cover (Volume 3, #10), painted by Kong Som Ol, employee of the Phnom Penh USIS Information Division, mid-1950s.



Figures 4a and b: Bong Sovat, a Thai student at New York's Pratt Institute. Left: in painting class. Right: "Standing looking at the work of red-skinned Americans from long ago" in the Brooklyn museum. (Free World, Volume 1, #1.)

Cold War read from its centers was a competition produced by the polarized aftermath of a war, in peripheries like Cambodia, it was what followed colonialism, toning and tempering new-found independence. Cambodia emerged from the tumult of World War II and the subsequent years of its struggle for independence as a weak yet nominally free country, largely disentangled from the economic and cultural networks of dependency which the French Protectorate had spun around it. With the disintegration of a Protectorate cultural policy that had institutionalized and policed a particular notion of the “Cambodian Arts” as handmade, traditional, and unchanging, the definition of art in the newly independent nation seemed suddenly open.⁴ Encouraged by Head of State, Norodom Sihanouk, a young elite embraced creative thinking, modernization, and an expansion of the definitions of what Cambodian culture could be (Figure 5), drawing some of their ideas, models, and images from Cold War-generated aid and information programs.

Those procuring aid in this new order of things often engaged in strenuous contortions

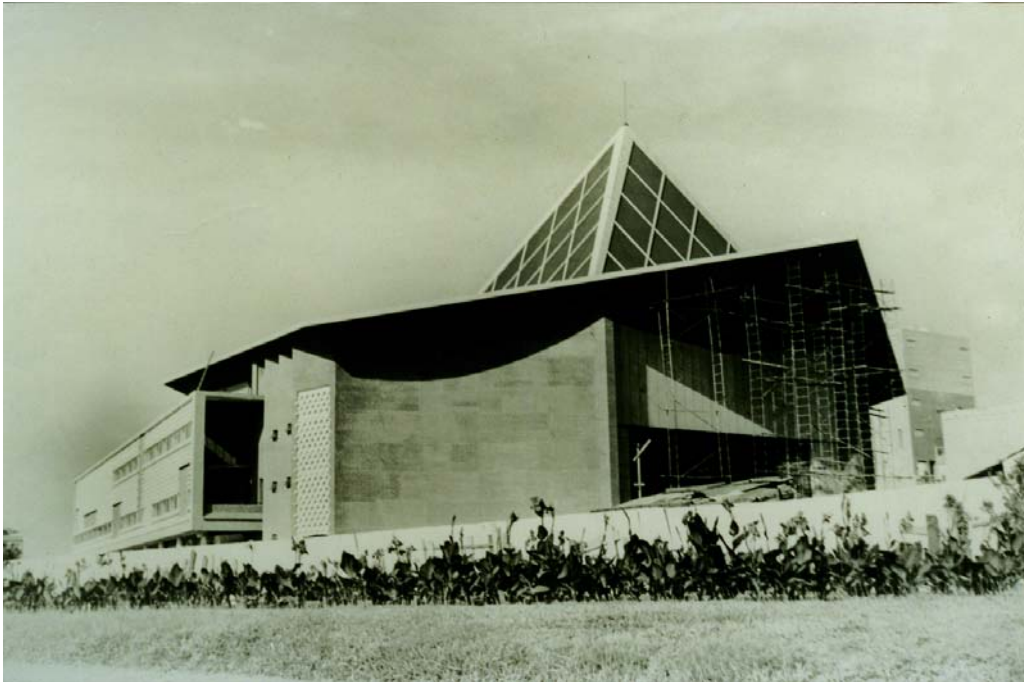


Figure 5: The Bassac Theater, designed by Cambodia’s first Western-trained architect, Vann Molyvann, whose work in the Sangkum period explicitly aimed to draw from Khmer tradition to create modern forms in dialogue with contemporary Western trends. (Ed.) (Unsourced archival image, provided by Reyum from Reyum database.)

⁴ See my Ph.D dissertation, “Citing Angkor: The “Cambodian Arts” in the Age of Restoration 1918 – 2000,” Columbia University, 2001.

to avoid accusations of neo-colonialism and thus, comparison to what had preceded. While Cambodia was to be courted and supported in all possible ways, the resulting inundations were publicly presented as instances of disinterested “aid,” offered in a spirit of “friendship” and “partnership” in order to “support Cambodian independence [while] respecting its policy of neutrality.”⁵ Describing English lessons offered to local monks in 1954, the head of the US Operations Mission to Cambodia noted that “this type of cultural penetration [will] form and influence Cambodia as it emerges into the modern world.”⁶ Cold War “cultural penetration” introduced local audiences to a sudden influx of a bewildering array of new forms. If we simply consider the sphere of visual culture, we find, for example, that “modern educational reforms” brought a whole range of new visual aids, training programs offered lessons ranging from international traffic signage to “Beginning of Life” poster displays, and various new forms of visual explanation inundated the countryside in attempts to encourage agricultural reform and the use of modern farming technologies (Figures 6 and 7). The curious disjointedness of such programs – thrown at Cambodia by a variety of fairly unsupervised and often somewhat renegade field officers and country representatives – seem to have created a series of sparks around which local culture, at least for a moment, flared up and moved off in ingenious and unexpected ways.

For example, both sides of the Cold War used photography and film as essential tools for presenting “images” of their “way of life” in order to “convert” local populations (Figure 8).⁷ Film showings were soon supplemented by training sessions which exposed a range of local government officials to basic film-making techniques (Figure 9). The use of film in US sponsored military training was meant both to encourage Cambodian commanders to review the performance of their troops, and to allow for images of military exercises – funded after all by vast US aid expenditures – to be sent back to Washington. The later locally famous film maker Sun Bun Ly learned basic production techniques with his military unit and then was sent to the US for additional training.⁸ Upon his return to Cambodia, Sun Bun Ly quickly abandoned the army and established

⁵ “Country Assessment Report-1960” Dispatch #16, January 28, 1961 in RG59 General Records of the Department of State, Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Planning and Development Staff, Country Files 1955-1964, Box 220.

⁶ Telegram December 29, 1954 Robert McClintock USOM PP to Dept of State, Dispatch 201, “USIS Director’s English Lessons to Cambodian Buddhist Priests.”

⁷ For discussions of “the image” see the Country Assessment Reports from 1959, 1960, and 1961 in RG59 General Records of the Department of State, Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Planning and Development Staff, Country Files 1955-1964, Box 220.

⁸ RG469 Records of US Foreign Assistance Agencies 1948-1961, Mission to Cambodia, Office of the Director Classified Subject Files 1951-58 250/80/16-/06-7, April 21, 1958 Memorandum for Record: meeting with Prince Viriya, Chief of Staff, Surface Defense.

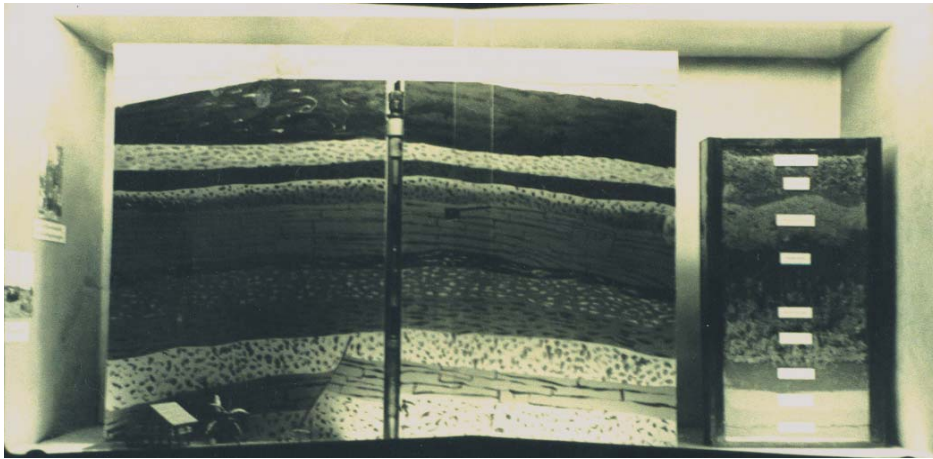


Figure 6: US Operations Mission Phnom Penh Building window display: well drilling. The sheer strangeness of these odd visual displays must have had their effect on passersby. (US National Archives at College Park, Maryland, RG286 CAM-62-141)



Figure 7: Poster on pesticide spraying for better rice, painted by Nhek Dim for the US Information Service, Phnom Penh. (Large poster collection of the National Archives of Cambodia)



Figure 8: USIS display windows, Phnom Penh, 1961. Above: the US space mission of May 1961. Below: the visit by Mr. Ho Tung Ho, director of the Teacher Training College, to the US. (US National Archives at College Park, Maryland, RG286 CAM-61-9031 (above); CAM-61-12727 (below))

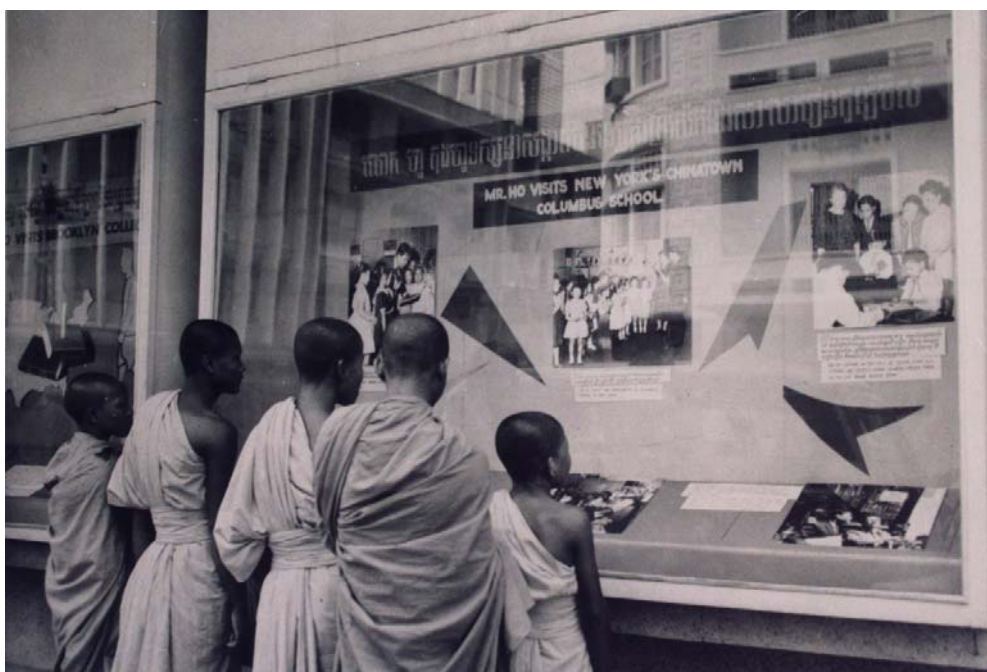




Figure 9: Film workshop with Mr. Julian Ely for the employees of the USIS Information Division, Vat Phnom, Phnom Penh, 1963. (US National Archives at College Park, Maryland, RG286 CAM-63-2139 (above); CAM-63-3124 (below))



one of the first commercial movie production companies in Cambodia.⁹ Other filmmakers, like Ly Bun Yim, were lured to the moving image through US Information Service-sponsored photography and film programs for high school students.¹⁰ By the early 1960s, a burgeoning local Khmer language film industry developed in which many of the major players had a background with one or another of the Information and Propaganda Services working to produce “images” for both sides of the Cold War divide.

A considerable still picture industry supplemented the production of moving images. Nhek Dim, a young graduate from the School of Cambodian Arts, was the first Cambodian “artist” hired by the US Information Service in Phnom Penh to help paint the wide range of posters, charts, educational materials and propaganda posters which the Service produced (Figure 10; See also Figure 7 above, and Figures 10-12 of “Haunted Scenes...”). Visual materials and books from the US were readily available in the free reading room of the American library in Phnom Penh, which also began to sponsor annual art exhibitions for local painters. Remembered as the central forum for an emerging “modern Khmer painting,” the American library exhibits were

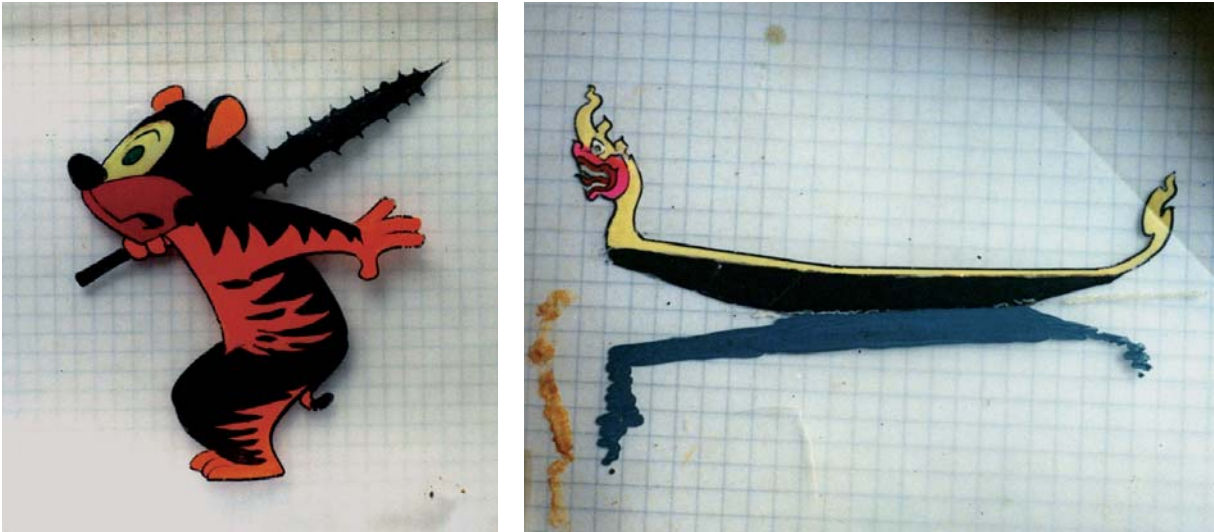


Figure 10: “Busy art room of the Communications Media Division,” US Information Service, Phnom Penh, 1960. Nhek Dim is in the center, smiling. (US National Archives at College Park, Maryland, RG286 CAM-60-410)

⁹ Conversations with Ly Bun Yim, 2000-2002.

¹⁰ Conversations with Ly Bun Yim, 2000-2002.

complemented by visiting artist lectures, photo displays of modern American painting, and initiatives funding various sections – both traditional and modern – at the School of Cambodian Arts (See Figure 9 of “Haunted Scenes...” and Figure 10 of “States of Panic...” in the present volume). In his capacity as an “artist” with the Information Service, Nhek Dim was repeatedly sent for training in various aspects of visual communication, and eventually, in the mid-1960s, studied in the US “with Walt Disney.”¹¹ He returned from this trip to the US to become the most famous painter in Phnom Penh, producing not only a wide range of landscapes and Angkorian scenes in a loose brushy style, but also creating the first Cambodian language animated cartoon under the patronage of the Royal Palace (Figures 11a and b). Remembered today as a dashing personality driving around late 1960s Phnom Penh in his imported Mustang (“the car with the horse on it”), Nhek Dim came to embody the image of an “artist” for a whole generation of young Cambodian painters coming of age in the shadow of impending war.



Figures 11a and b: Cartoon images by Nhek Dim. (Un sourced, courtesy of Reyum from Reyum database.)

If we take these self-consciously “Cambodian” filmmakers and “modern Khmer” painters¹² as emblematic of the somewhat unintended effects of Cold War aid on local culture, then what characterizes their forms? The filmmaker Ly Bun Yim describes it best, perhaps: “We didn’t have the technique or money to compete with Hollywood films,” he tells me. “We had to improvise our own special effects – to make a husband appear on his wife’s tongue, for example,

¹¹ Conversations with Tang Hor Yi, Sam Kem Chang, Pen Tra, Chet Chan 1998-2002.

¹² Conversations with Ly Bun Yim, Sam Kem Chang, Pen Tra 1998-2002.

or to have the ground open up to swallow someone. But because we chose ancient Khmer fables and legends, making them come alive as moving images, we were very popular” (Figure 12). In other words, traditional subject matter was transposed into forms locally perceived as “new” and “international” – film, cartoons, gestural painting – thus producing a self-consciously “modern” yet explicitly “Cambodian” visual art. In Nhek Dim’s paintings as well, the gestural form read as “modern” within the Cambodian context, while the subjects depicted remain traditional village life, rural women, and the temples of Angkor (Figure 13. See also Figures 11-12 of “Haunted Scenes...”).



Figure 12: Poster of Sangkum period film by Ly Bun Yim
(Un sourced, courtesy of Reyum from Reyum database.)

That traditional local subjects were used to infuse imported forms with Cambodian identity is an understandable tactic. One of the most innovative re-usings of the indigenous past is found in the work of the Cambodian architect, Vann Molyvann. His design for a National Sports Complex, built in downtown Phnom Penh in the mid-1960s remobilized what he called “Angkorian principles” in a contemporary context (Figure 14), while his Chatomuk Theater used elements of indigenous temple architecture to structure a building considered emblematic of a new national architecture (Figure 15). In Vann Molyvann’s buildings of the late 1950s and 1960s, local citations fuse with equally explicit translations and reutilizations of ideas from early 20th-century Western architecture, assimilated both during his studies in France and during subsequent partnerships with an international cast of Phnom Penh-based urban planning advisors.¹³

The Chatomuk Theater was one of the

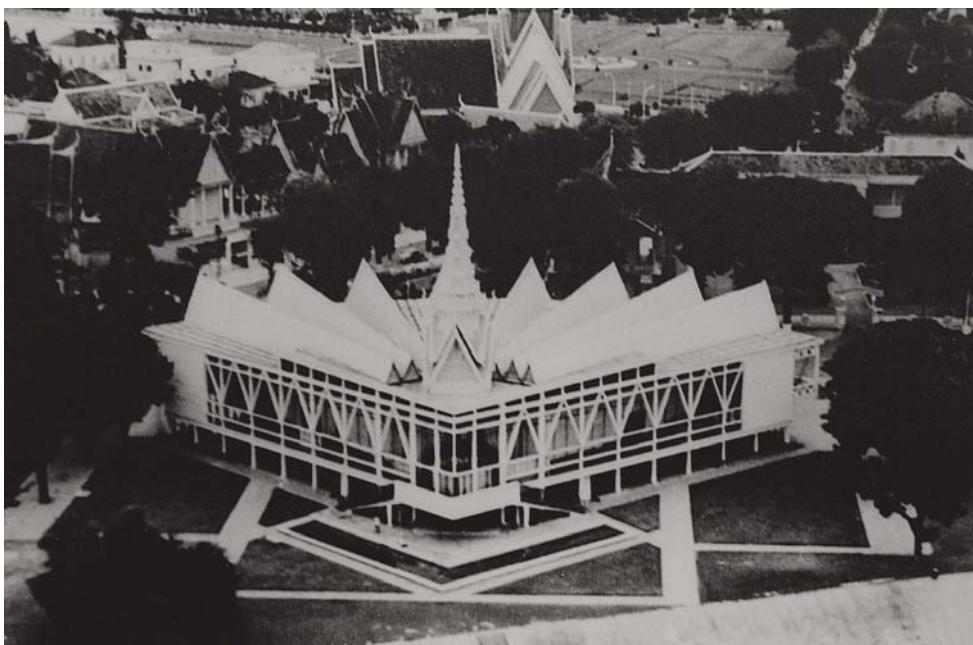
¹³ “A Conversation with Vann Molyvann,” Interview by Ingrid Muan, Ly Daravuth and Preap Chan Mara, August 24, 2001 as partially printed in *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, eds. I. Muan and Ly Daravuth, Reyum, Phnom Penh, 2001.



*Figure 13: Painting by Nhek Dim
(Un sourced, courtesy of Reyum from Reyum database.)*



*Figure 14: Vann Molyvann's "Olympic Stadium."
(Un sourced, courtesy of Reyum from Reyum database.)*



*Figures 15a: Vann Molyvann's Chatomuk Theater.
(Un sourced, courtesy of Reyum from Reyum database.)*



*Figures 15b: Vann Molyvann's Chatomuk Theater.
(Un sourced, courtesy of Reyum from Reyum database.)*

first buildings Vann Molyvann designed upon his return from France, courtesy of a US aid initiative which wished to provide Cambodia with an auditorium for “events of national, cultural and public interest.”¹⁴ “Buildings,” as one Phnom Penh based US diplomat put it at the time, have “impact value,” and the United States sponsored “projects of the heart at the human level” should not be “housed in buildings built by the aid of others.”¹⁵ It was exquisitely appropriate, perhaps, that Vann Molyvann chose to design such a Cold War aid-sponsored auditorium as a structure with “all faces” and “no back.”¹⁶ Although he linked his design for the Chatomuk Theater to its site at the “four faces” – the intersection of the Mekong, Tonle Sap and Bassac Rivers in downtown Phnom Penh – the theater in a sense embodies the position of neutrality by which Sihanouk’s Cambodia attempted to face in all directions during the polarized decades of the 1950s and 60s. Inundated by Cold War image campaigns, Sihanouk’s government produced and projected its own image of a newly independent, neutral and flourishing nation, setting Vann Molyvann’s building projects at the center of its picture (Figure 16). Limited to select urban venues and cultivated by a small intellectual elite, the cultural forms celebrated in this image kingdom strayed farther and farther away from the realities of everyday local life. The

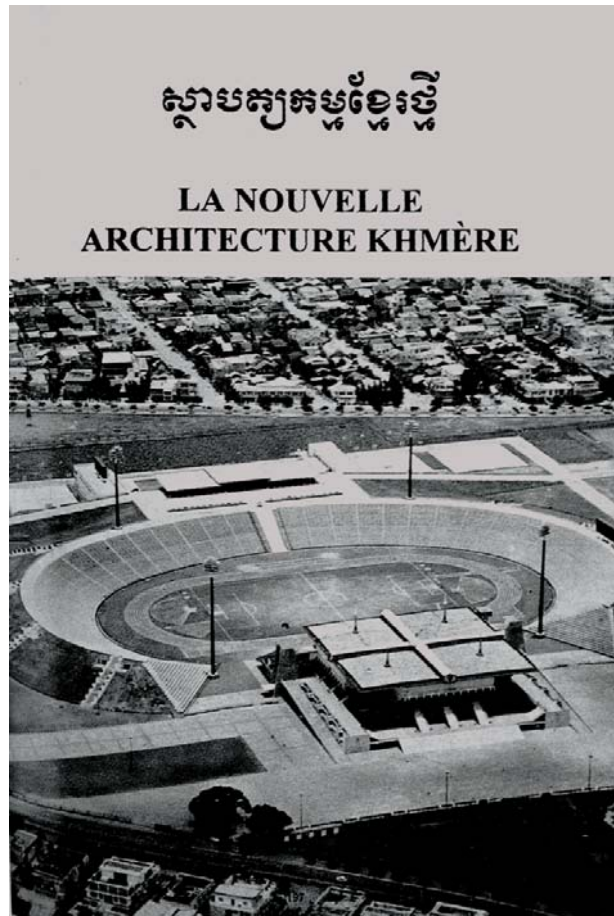


Figure 16: Sangkum magazine story highlighting Vann Molyvann’s Olympic Stadium. (Un sourced, courtesy of Reyum from Reyum database.)

¹⁴ RG469 Records of US Foreign Assistance Agencies 1948-1961, Mission to Cambodia, Office of the Director, Subject Files 1952-56 250 / 80 / 15 - / 5.3 1956, February 9, 1956, Paul Beidler, Housing and Architectural Division to Strauss, Conference with HE Sam Sary.

¹⁵ RG469 Records of US Foreign Assistance Agencies 1948-1961, Mission to Cambodia, Office of the Director, Subject Files 1952-56 250 / 80 / 15 - / 5.3 1956, June 5, 1956, Office Memorandum Beidler to Walling, The Economic aspects of Building Construction.

¹⁶ Conversations with Vann Molyvann, 2002-2004.

forms of such an official image may have come to lay the foundation for a broader modern national culture if Cambodia had not collapsed into the devastations of the 1970s and 80s brought on by the American war in Vietnam. Or they may have remained an official veneer, a surface for international presentation and elite consumption which bore little relation to local realities of the time.

If we fast forward to the new era of post Cold War “aid” and “influence” which has flooded Cambodia over the last decade – following internationally sponsored elections said to have produced instant “democracy” and thus “development” – the faces and facades of such official veneers are all that seems to have survived. The newly built Ministry of Foreign Affairs in downtown Phnom Penh consists of a rectangular box adorned with a grab bag of signs that have become generic and repetitive markers for “Cambodian” (Figure 17). False Angkorian arches, columns that bear no weight, repeated ornamental molded medallions, and gateways leading nowhere – these quotes no longer structure a new form but are simply pasted onto a box, topped by towers and pierced at regular intervals by completely standardized dark glass windows. In a recent interview, the now elderly Vann Molyvann warned, “you don’t just take a lot of Khmer ornaments and put them all over the building and call it Khmer. They do that today but I don’t



*Figure 17: New Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Phnom Penh.
(Photograph courtesy of Reyum.)*



Figure 18: New Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in its 21st-century setting. (Photograph courtesy of Reyum.)

agree with that at all.”¹⁷ While the Foreign Ministry building in this reading offends with a jumble of empty surface signs, its setting perhaps more accurately embodies the legacies of Cambodia’s particular post-independence trajectory. Lying in the shadow of a foreign-owned Casino and Hotel complex supposedly being built through bribery in an area zoned for national institutions, the Ministry looks somehow both quaint and cheap (Figure 18). As such, it presents perhaps the perfect inadvertent image for a country still deluged by, and tangled in, forces from far beyond its borders.

¹⁷ “A Conversation with Vann Molyvann”, Interview by Ingrid Muan, Ly Daravuth and Preap Chan Mara, August 24, 2001 in *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, eds. I. Muan and Ly Daravuth, Reyum, Phnom Penh, 2001: 17.