

Sonderdruck aus:

Geographische Zeitschrift

Band 102 · 2014 · Heft 2

Franz Steiner Verlag



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Between planning and spontaneous order: the 'equifinal' production of urban space in colonial Phnom Penh (1860s-1930s)

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This paper examines the roles of both 'coloniser' and 'colonised' in the spatial construction of Phnom Penh. This key site of French colonisation in Cambodia was part of a network of French-ruled cities in Indochina, established to steer and enhance the productivity of the colonial society. The production of this particular space in Phnom Penh, however, was at no time simply a top-down process, imposed by the coloniser on the colonised. At the very moment of the foundation of the colonial town, indigenous actors used the city as an opportunity to pursue their own interests. Two contradictory phenomena – the constraints of colonial structures and the agency displayed by individuals – converged to produce a new, 'equifinal' urban space. Based on a historical analysis of the expanding urban morphology (in a historico-geographical approach), this article examines the 'mise-en-valeur' (capitalistic valorisation) of city space as a bilateral process: commodification of urban estates and formalisation of planning by the colonial administration with indigenous bandwagoning and – vice versa – freeriding of the colonial state with regard to indigenous common property resources. The supposed opposition between the action of planning and the reaction to being 'planned' thus turns out to be a false dichotomy: Phnom Penh's colonial space emerged as a joint venture in a settlement process that was both formal and informal.

Keywords: Phnom Penh, colonial history, informal settlement, urban morphology, production of space

Zwischen Planung und spontaner Ordnung: die äquifinale Koproduktion städtischen Raumes im kolonialen Phnom Penh (1860-1930)

Der Beitrag untersucht die Rolle von „Kolonialisierern“ und „Kolonialisierten“ in der Produktion des Stadtraums von Phnom Penh. Die Hauptstadt Kambodschas spielte, als Teil eines ganz Französisch-Indochina umfassenden Netzwerkes neuer Stadtzentren, für die kolonial-kapitalistische Inwertsetzung eine Schlüsselrolle. Die Produktion dieses spezifischen Ortes erfolgte jedoch nicht in einem simplen *top-down* Prozess, denn mit Gründung der Kolonialstadt nutzten auch einheimische Akteure den neu entstehenden Stadtraum dazu, ihre eigenen Interessen zu realisieren. Zwei nur scheinbar entgegen gesetzte Wirkrichtungen mündeten in eine „äquifinale“ Raumproduktion. Dieser bilaterale Prozess der Inwertsetzung von Stadtraum wird anhand der expandierenden Stadtmorphologie nach einem historisch-geographischen Ansatz analysiert: Auf der einen Seite wird so die Raumproduktion als Kommodifizierung und Formalisierung der Stadtplanung durch die Kolonialadministration sichtbar, auf der andere Seite können darin auch urbane Mitläufer-Effekte durch indigene Vorteilssucher ausgemacht werden. Dieses „Windschatten-Verhältnis“ konnte sich aber auch umkehren, und das „höhere“ koloniale Machtpotential folgte im Städtebau dann dem „schwächeren“ indigenen als „Trittbrettfahrer“, um Gemeingüter zu inkorporieren. Damit wird eine Dichotomie zwischen geplant und ungeplant hinfällig: Phnom Penhs kolonialer Stadtraum entwickelte sich im kontinuierlichen Wechselspiel zwischen „formalen“ und „informalen“ Siedlungsbau.

Schlüsselwörter: Phnom Penh, Kolonialgeschichte, Informalität, Stadtmorphologie, Raumproduktion

1 Introduction

This article proposes a new reading of Phnom Penh's development under the French colonial regime, offering an alternative to the master narrative of the planned colonial city, shared even by Cambodian architects and authors such as Vann Molyvann (2003) – the preeminent city planner after independence. I shall be arguing that the colonial city emerged as a specific hybrid place because the vernacular agenda of town building persisted. Material evidence of such hybridity can be detected in physical form: in architecture, as well as in the street layout. Specifically, the latter, the rectangular urban morphology, is usually ascribed to French initiative and rationale alone. In practice, however, the process of city building in colonial Phnom Penh, especially in its initial stages, was embedded in a principally open system: as with any other colonising regime, the French in Cambodia also needed, in one way or another, the cooperation and collaboration of the colonised (Osterhammel 2003). This article asserts that the physical extension of the city was concomitant with the expansion of French order, seeking to bring indigenous (as well as deviant 'white' parts of) society under colonial rule. French planning as an anticipatory element, however, was constantly confronted with the *fait accompli* of the indigenous local land use and vernacular planning. While French control was strengthened, the city's expansion also offered opportunities to the Khmer (and other local) population in a dialectic urban design process, one that appears complementary rather than conflictual.

Based on a micro-analysis of Phnom Penh's expansion, the perspective of morphological collaboration calls certain assumptions and simplifications regarding the colonial metropolis and its regime into question. In her study of colonial Singapore, Brenda Yeoh challenged the predominant paradigm of colonial (British) supremacy and planning 'from above', which is a rare example for Southeast Asia in colonial context: 'The built spaces of the colonial city were not simply shaped by dominant forces or powerful groups,

but were continuously transformed by processes of conflict and negotiation' (Yeoh 2003, 313). The case study of Phnom Penh demonstrates first that the margin for negotiation was even larger in French Indochina and that 'bottom up' practice needs to be reappraised: the Khmer building tradition entailed not only inertia and resistance to, but also a certain degree of cooperation with French planning efforts, resulting in a shared and collectively produced city layout. Second, informal or spontaneous forms of local settlement even pioneered later formal urban development. The grid-shaped morphology of Phnom Penh is as much Khmer as it is French. The study of Phnom Penh shows that similar urban forms/urban morphologies emerged as a result of quite different sets of processes and building traditions. That is, different historical processes may have a similar outcome. Hence, the line drawn in theory to distinguish between formal and informal city development is not only blurred but constitutes an inadequate tool to describe this phenotype of urban geography – a kind of 'third' (or hybrid) space. 'Projects of power as shaped by the acute entanglements of the dominant and the subaltern' (Dube 2010, 126) have attracted much attention from postcolonial theorists, though the latter have been criticised for their 'alleged disregard for historical specificity and precision' and their ideological (anti-colonial) bias. In return, postcolonial critics tend to consider historians 'as predisposed by the very nature of their own discipline towards empiricism or positivism' (Howe 2013, 163; see also Kennedy 2013). This mutual distrust does not seem very fruitful, which is why this study – without positioning itself in the postcolonial field – questions the ready dichotomy between metropolis and the margins and highlights the mutual shaping of colonial planning and local building practices.

Accordingly, I suggest adding 'equifinality' to the vocabulary of urban morphology studies, a term coined by the founder of General Systems Theory (Bertalanffy 1949) to mark a specific synthesis (or hybridity). The new equifinal colonial urban space of Phnom Penh became 'an

agent of order and change in and of itself', as Carroll-Burke (2002, 80) has shown for a very different colonial context. The central argument of this article is that the competing as well as cooperating morphologies of traditional French and Khmer planning not only promoted a common city layout, to which both sides contributed and implicitly agreed, but also supported the social engineering undertaken by the French administration.

2 Unplanned settlements in historical perspective

By definition, informal settlements exist in locations where housing units have been created without official approval and in a manner that is not in compliance with planning and building regulations (UN-Habitat, see www.unhabitat.org). The act of illegal land occupation and the physical non-conformity of the construction are the two key characteristics of urban-built informality. The determination of what counts as formal or informal and the sharp distinction between legal and illegal have always been part of a political power game of interests. Redrawing this flexible line in favour of the powerful, especially in matters of property and land use, constitutes a central aspect of western colonialism. In this regard, French officials in colonial Cambodia (1860s-1950s) used the terms 'illegal' or 'anarchic' to denounce settlements built with informal methods. In a historico-geographical analysis it would be an anachronism to use the modern expression 'informal settlement' for several reasons. First of all, there is no agreed-upon descriptive term in current literature ('slums', 'shanty towns', 'informal settlements', 'bidonvilles', 'Elendsquartiere', 'gececondu' are used interchangeably). Second, its meaning changes according to the context in which it is used (Herrle/Fokdal 2011). The term 'informal' became popular in the 1970s, in the golden age of politically motivated development aid after the Second World War. The stress was not only on inadequate infrastructure and dwellings, or

poor access to health and education facilities; informal settlements were also considered to be an unintentional and inevitable stepping stone on the way to progress by optimistic adherents to the modernisation theory.

This line of argument has been rebutted by recent research and publications, which have granted informal (or unplanned) settlements a more positive assessment. Informal settlements are now regarded as a permanent feature and even a necessity for sustainable urban development in (less) developed and newly industrialised countries. Architects, urban planners and sociologists in particular advocate this alternative view to urban misery. In their opinion, the informal way of making a city, by auto-construction of buildings and spontaneous arrangement of the urban tissue, reflects the need for affordable housing and the enduring cultural values of their inhabitants. According to this paradigm of informal urbanity as a form of traditional urbanism ('architecture without architects' and 'urban planning without planners'), even refugee camps, environments of self-built and self-administered daily life, became examples of cities-in-progress (Herz 2013, 19): it represents the physical side of what Evers and Korff named 'subsistence production' (1986). The present investigation follows this paradigm, applying the methodology of meticulous on-site documentation to archival findings. The scrutinisation of Phnom Penh's historical city pattern, particularly the socio-political relationship of land coverage as solid parts and open voids of the city tissue (figure and ground), borrows from the so-called British school of urban morphology (with conceptual roots in German-speaking research on 'Stadtlandschaft', 'Städtebaugeschichte' and 'Städtebau'. See the "International Journal of Urban Morphology" as their scientific stage; Whitehand 2012; Heineberg 2007).

The study is based on a critical analysis of archival sources in Cambodia (National Archives of Cambodia, Phnom Penh) and France (National Overseas Archives of France, Aix-en-Provence) with a focus on records of public works, maps and photo documentation. These

documents will be compared to data gathered on several fieldtrips undertaken for the author's Ph.D. project, to reconstruct the development of Phnom Penh's colonial urban landscape as a cartographic exegesis. Adding to the archival sourcework, informal settlements in Phnom Penh and their structure were investigated in winter 2009-10 and 2011-12.

Sources from colonial contexts are evidently biased. Akin to a 'white paper', such urban planning documents are part of official policy and reflect the view of the administration, whether they come in the shape of alignment, cadastral or urban development plans. They are authoritative visual reports, a tool for implementing colonial rule. They express aims for the future of the city as a whole, but depict only a fraction of the situation at hand. Despite being based on actual experience and facts, they turn a blind eye to informal/spontaneous development, which constituted the main part of the city's reality. As documents, 'they cross the line between information and advocacy' (Monmonier 1996, xii). For the French administration, these documents served as a yardstick for current and potential developments as well as a 'white cane' to tentatively disentangle the complex property and ownership structures attached to social and political relations in the capital.

In order to understand the actual everyday co-production of space, this article examines visual documents as 'texts' (Goh/Yeoh 2003). In a micro-analytical approach to the historical space, the drawings and maps of the French government will be systematically read 'along the archival grain'. As Ann Laura Stoler has shown for the Dutch East Indies, the colonial archives may be analysed as a 'force field' that not only inscribes the authority of the colonial state, but 'also registers other reverberations, crosscurrent frictions, attractions, and aversions that worked within and against those assertions of imperial rights to property, persons and profits' (Stoler 2009, 22). A rereading of the colonial archives allows a challenging of the mapped colonial narrative of the unilateral planned city. This approach also allows the bypassing of a supposed

archival 'lacuna' of indigenous sources which contrasts with the abundance of the colonial administration's paperwork (Osborne 1997, viii).

In doing so, remarkable parallels between colonial and current times can be discerned. At first, French colonialism implemented a Western method of formalisation and commodification of traditional Khmer settlements and their predominant informal arrangements. Similar to today's generally undocumented informal settlements in the Global South, the majority of Phnom Penh's urban dwellers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also used to live in neighbourhoods and communities (villages) off the colonial maps – literally, because official maps hardly charted existing or newly emerging settlements. A micro-analysis of Phnom Penh's city development during colonial times can reveal underlying urban patterns of remarkable resilience. These 'unplanned' quarters were neither in any way unplanned nor illegal and anarchic, as they were denounced by the colonial (and today's) regime in Phnom Penh. Research on a similar scale in contemporary grass-roots settlements in Phnom Penh confirms their specific order and organization (Clerc 2005; Clerc 2008; Simone 2008; Springer 2010; Saphan 2007; Wehrmann 2005).

To give appropriate recognition to the planned in the allegedly unplanned or anarchic, and to draw attention to the historical contribution of indigenous participants in colonial urban life, I will use the term 'spontaneous' to describe this urban phenomenon. The French imprint on the city will be assessed in detail first, focusing on hydraulic modernisation, and the limits of social engineering and capitalisation, followed by an analysis of the 'bottom-up' practice of the common (wo)man and the 'top-down' planning by traditional Khmer elites close to the king.

3 The French urban imprint

In the 1860s-80s Phnom Penh remained a very moderate settlement along the Tonle Sap-River, despite being the Protectorate's capital and royal

residence: it consisted mainly of two long rows of wooden dwellings (the 'Grand Rue'), used for the most part by merchants and followers of the king. Its urban landscape had a pronounced liminal-aquatic character: the houses, most of them on stilts, were lined up on natural or artificial elevations and causeways, surrounded by bodies of flowing and standing (or stagnant) water. Annual changes in the monsoon climate were responsible for an extreme hydraulic regime, causing the periodically rising or falling profile of a 'tidal' town and its urban wetlands (Kolnberger 2014, 49; 92f.).

3.1 The impact of hydraulic modernisation

From the mid-1880s, the French colonial administration planned and executed a hydraulic modernisation by digging a U-shaped canal ('Canal de Pnom-Penh' or 'Canal intérieur', completed by 1894) around the northern part, which also demarcated the 'white' colonial city. Most of the colonial administration's buildings were concentrated there. This quarter also housed the 'respectable' part of European colonial society (ANOM 1920a; ANOM 1885). The central market area, arranged in good order, was separated by a distancing trench to the south. Fuelled by capital and investment from Indochina and other parts of Asia, it became the pulsating economic heart of the city and of the protectorate. Inhabitants of Chinese background dominated in this quarter, whereas further south a mixed court society of – in the ethnic nomenclature of the period – Cambodians, Sino-Khmers, Europeans, Chinese, Vietnamese ('Annamites'), Siamese, Filipinos, Laotians and Cham-Malays, centred their settlements around the king's palace. To some degree, Phnom Penh represented a 'plural society', encompassing different communities with unrelated cultural backgrounds in a 'dual colonial city', where the marketplace became the dominant organizing force for the division of labour (Furnivall 1944; Furnivall 1980; Muller 2006, 59). Notwithstanding this diversity, common bonds did exist and the French launched a

process of social engineering by restructuring the urban foundation of the Khmer regime as a new French colonial one. Phnom Penh and the other sub-central places of colonial Cambodia ('residences' of the district administration) were planned as 'compact cities' in an orthogonal layout with high residential density and mixed land uses according to zoning plans (ANOM 1884-1885; ANOM 1920b; Sreang 2004). Nations can be 'imagined', states cannot: this apparatus had to be materially engineered. To improve colonial presence, a city-cum-roads scheme was launched in Phnom Penh and later expanded in order to impose a physical presence on the entire protectorate (Edwards 2007; Edwards 2006; Del Testa 1999).

The existing double-linear settlement of Phnom Penh (Fig. 1, right side) was designed to extend in regular street lines, laying the ground for the urban 'hinterland' of a compact city. First, the French 'projet d'alignement' concentrated on the north (around the eponymous city hill) and the inner south, with the new market. A river scheme was to control the fluvial sedimentation of the adjacent riverbanks, while a semi-circular canal and drainage helped to control the river flow and gradually dewatered the surface.

The earthworks were carried out manually in the form of 'road-and-dike' cutting (causeway), using the excavated soil to level the adjacent ground on the spot. In the 1900s the soil-digging work was dislocated from the dam and separated from the landfill operation: a narrow-gauge railway with portable tracks ('système Decauville') transported the filling material from excavation chambers ('chambres d'emprunt') outside the proper city area to filling chambers ('chambres de remblais') within the planned city extension. After the First World War, this land reclamation with polders was further advanced by using floating steam dredgers pumping fluvial sedimentation via pipelines to the setup polder embankment (see Fig. 2b) – a system still in use today (for a hydrotechnical chronology see Pierdet 2008, 272).

On paper, French municipal authorities planned as they did in France. The impetus for

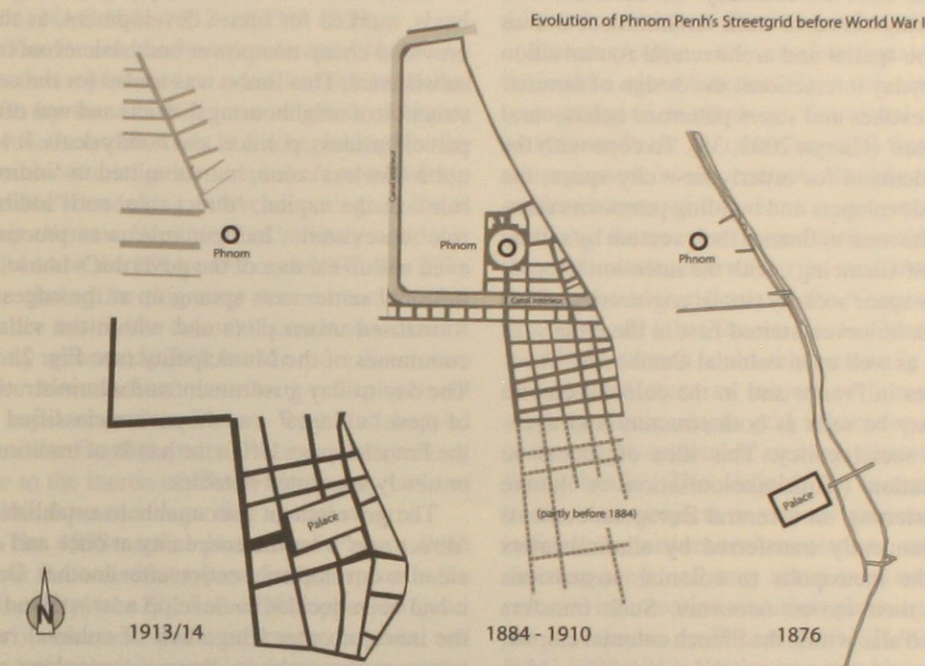


Fig. 1: Phnom Penh's urban growth and expanding street morphology
Drawing made by the author based on: NAC 1876, ANOM 1912-1913, ANOM 1927

this style can be found in Napoleon I's decree of 16 September 1807, which François Laisney (2002) has elevated to the status of 'article fondateur' of modern planning in France (MDF 1824). By virtue of this law, urban municipalities with more than 2,000 inhabitants were legally in charge of urban and regional planning and its execution ('l'aménagement urbain et du territoire'). Napoleon's intention was to capitalise on – in the view of the lawmakers – underused areas. In particular, idle swamps and common land ('biens communaux') were to be commoditised. Phnom Penh's amphibious landscape fit this categorisation, which helps to explain the French decision to drain the traditional 'hydraulic' Cambodian cityscapes (on 'hydraulic cities', see Groslier 1979). The Napoleonic planning laws had a 'tilt effect' on city development. Prior to these laws, the superstructure (buildings) alone dominated the planning. Now the civil

engineering of infrastructure (roads, sewers, communication etc.) became the leitmotif for the master plans. The subordination of building construction to infrastructure was supported by calls for more hygienic living conditions, a concurrent paradigm of the era.

3.2 The limits of social engineering

In the second half of the nineteenth century France experienced a demographic rise and industrial expansion. As the urban population doubled or tripled, even smaller French towns extended considerably, which had repercussions for the colonies. The overseas colonial penetration implied that governmental power was not limited to interconnected town centres, but began to reach out into the urban hinterland, in order to incorporate more distant territories

into the state bureaucracy. In addition, 'the structuring force of built-environment comes from the spatial and architectural routinisation of everyday interactions: the design of familiar places evokes and steers patterned behavioural responses' (Gieryn 2002, 35). To cope with the rising demand for orderly new city space, the public developers and building promoters combined the need to finance their venture by selling lots (self-financing), with the intention to order the new space socially (social engineering). This process, however, started first in the cities – in France as well as in colonial Cambodia.

Cities in France and in the colonial empire thus may be seen as both structure and agency for social policy. This idea of 'domestic colonisation' ('Binnenkolonisation' or 'Innere Kolonisierung' in a central European context) was seamlessly transferred by administrators from the metropolis to colonial possessions during their *cursus honorum*. Such transfers occurred also within the French colonial empire, sometimes between imperial systems, or – vice versa – from colonial overseas to the colonial home country. Some ideas could materialise even faster and in a more profound way in the periphery than in the metropolis (Vacher 1997; Wright 1991; Rabinow 1989).

In Cambodia, the French urbanisation process was Janus-faced. On the one hand, the colonial government turned a blind eye to some spontaneous, 'illegal' settlements, also leaving selected spaces deliberately undeveloped. On the other hand, other areas – especially the inner-city parts – were closely monitored. This double process of social engineering may be deduced from scattered files in the archives, which show that urban space was first rendered intelligible through mapping, land registration and exploratory reports. This new intelligibility of space allowed for social surveillance and economic management by attaching fees and directives to the re-ordered space. While makeshift arrangements were rendered illegal, legal action was not always considered expedient. The successive administrations (not just the French; the same strategy may still be observable today) purposely

let informal settlers live temporarily on some lands, marked for future development, as they provided cheap manpower and basic economic subsistence. This limbo was useful for the construction of neighbouring districts and was often part of business, political and family deals. It was not a 'lawless' zone, but submitted to 'indirect rule'. In the capital, 'direct rule' and 'indirect rule' co-existed. 'Indirect rule' was practised even within earshot of the governor's house, as informal settlements sprang up at the edges of formalised urban plots and within the village communes of the Municipality (see Fig. 2a-b). The day-to-day government and administration of these 'villages' – as they were classified by the French – were left in the hands of traditional or newly appointed notables.

The government was unable to establish its 'direct rule' over the entire city at once and decided to develop one section after another. Once it had been decided to develop a 'wasteland' in the inner or outer fringe belt of colonial rule, however, the archives show a scrupulous and nitpicking bureaucracy at work. Beautification, hygienic reasoning and fire protection represented one side of the argument, the displacement of the poor and unwanted, the (un-avowed) other one. Building codes and registration costs reveal the unfolding and expanding regulation frenzy, starting from the mid-1880s, which rendered the costs of maintenance and rebuilding unaffordable for the former inhabitants and thus resulted in their eviction. Every suspect was charged and petty infringements, such as the storage of goods in places formerly perceived as commons like sidewalks as sites for warehousing and displaying merchandise or riverbanks for disembarking people and goods, were fined (NAC 1887). Even the river traffic itself was regulated (NAC 1890, NAC 1882). Defining certain sectors of the city for exercising legal prostitution, for instance, certainly did not prevent violations of the law, yet it allowed possibilities for repeated intervention. 'Zoning' for legal prostitution and for the operation of 'maisons de tolérance' (licensed brothels) became spatially more and more accurate with four consecutive ordinances, mirroring

the gradual grip on the city (NAC 1885; NAC 1901; NAC 1911-1912; ANOM 1933).

The French patchwork rule over the colony was thus reproduced on a smaller scale in Phnom Penh by the establishment of zones of higher or lower control. Only at the beginning did the French colonial government share overlordship with the Khmer king, before mounting a colonial *coup d'état* under threat of military action in 1884 (ANOM 1884a; Osborne 1997, 49, 272). The timing for this coup was no accident, as France itself – the colonial homeland – concurrently witnessed a shift to even more direct state rule.¹ Nevertheless, the effective displacement of royal control in Phnom Penh and beyond protracted until the turn of the twentieth century due to the inertia of Khmer customary law and political practice regarding spatial control.

The 1930s aerial pictures of Phnom Penh show three distinct types of urban space in the 'inner city' (see Fig. 2a-b of the upper '3e Quartier'): reformed space, reform in progress, and bordering 'wilderness' of spontaneous settlements. Figure 2a captures the view in the northern direction, with properly arranged bricks-and-mortar buildings, partly on the ground of the former half-circular canal which had been filled in after the First World War. 'Beng Dechor', one of the interior pond-swamps of Phnom Penh, is already impoldered and designated as a future construction zone of the compact city ('casier'). Figure 2b depicts the fairly built-up area of the 'Quartier Européen', with a view towards the south. In the forefront on the square, which formerly was the inner area of the northern bend of the canal, stands the Memorial for the (First) World War. In addition, a pipeline on stilts for land reclamation is visible and loose pipes are piled up on the site of the recently dismantled Vernéville Bridge. Most building lots are vacant; undeveloped space is dominant. However, this void served as a valuable functional space for the administration to establish order from scratch, and to confront and contain 'dysfunctional space'² – the *bête noire* of the colonial bureaucracy. For the magistrates, slow progress

of controlled city expansion was preferable to the mushrooming of a thriving informal city.

Paradoxically, even 'dysfunctional space' thus had a clear function. Two colonial tasks were assigned to all these 'functional spaces' in Phnom Penh: to raise financial funds and to implement social control. Outside the impoldered areas of the centre – geographically speaking, the quarters beyond the riverfront and the north-south causeway to the west, but within the administrative limits of the 'Commune de Phnom Penh' ('1er, 2e, 4e, 5e, 6e Quartier') – the administration could only erratically 'punch out' limited areas to subject to bureaucratic scrutiny. These single grid references outside of the proper settlement area represented urban 'bridgeheads'. The airfield, the water utility works, dam projects or various concessions to individuals, business or associations, such as a shooting range, all may serve as examples of colonial intervention via urban planning within the 'Commune de Phnom Penh' (NAC 1923; NAC 1903-1912). In the case that claims were submitted, the municipal administration's site investigation (and 'social reconnaissance' of the terrain) was accompanied by land registration acts in order to freeze-frame the legal and land use situation. An official land register and cadastre were established in 1892. Their progress was slow: only by 1919 was the full triangulation of Phnom Penh realised (Pierdet 2008, 142; Morizon 1934). Nonetheless, these spatial 'clippings' in Phnom Penh's low-density areas allowed the administration to gain an understanding of what the bigger picture looked like for the whole city-province.

Formalised city space gradually encroached on spontaneous settlements. A notable exception to this was the river peninsula of Chruï Changwa, a five-minute ferry trip away from the city center across the Tonle Sap river. This area in particular became a persistent social counterpart to the 'machine colonisatrice' (Vacher 1997, 136) of formal Phnom Penh: 'Unfortunately, Chruï-Changwa is a meeting place for prowling Annamites from Cochinchina and different

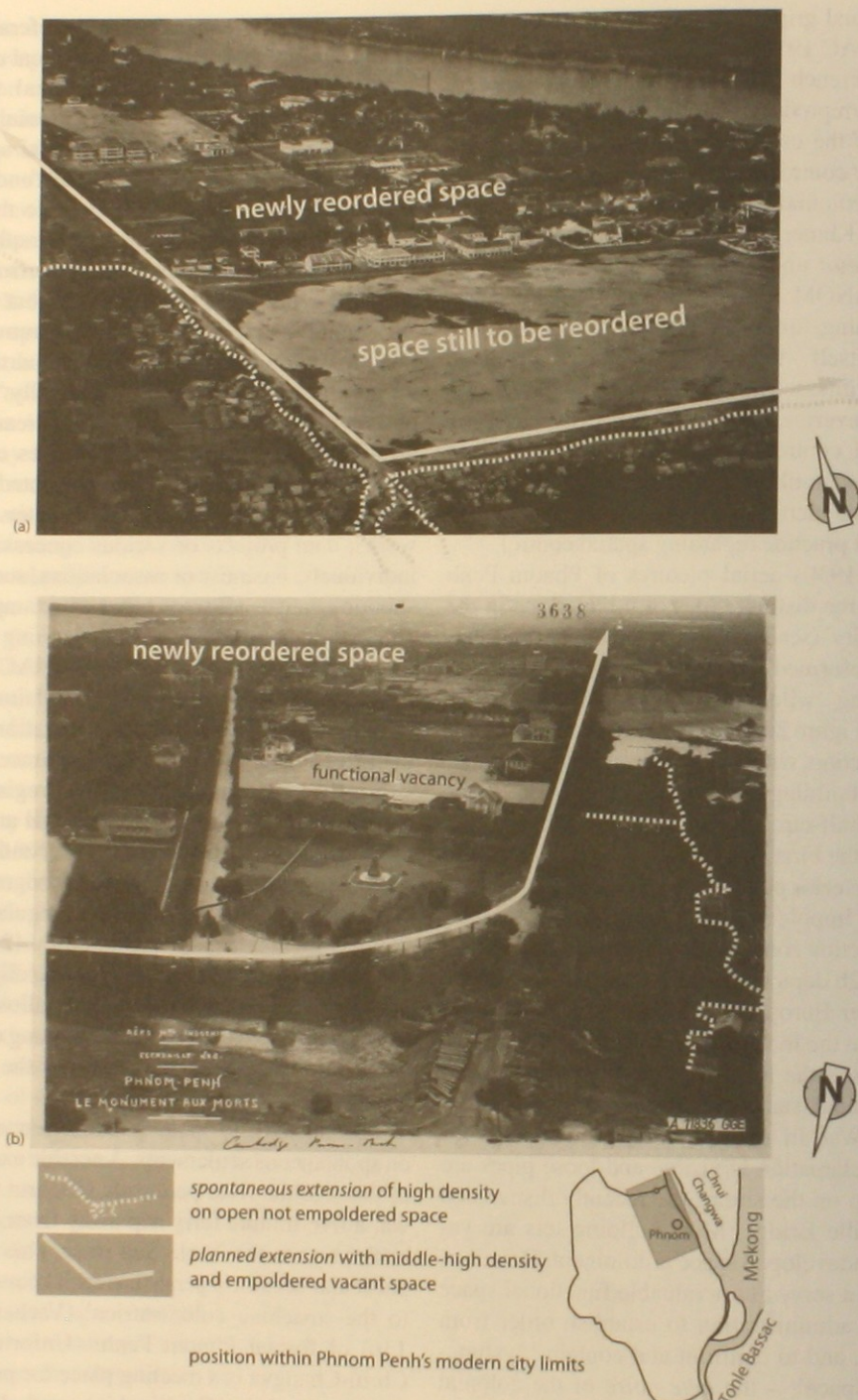


Fig. 2a-b: The colonial spatial divide of ordered and unordered space in Phnom Penh
 Author's draft based on: Fig. 2a: Le Casier du Beng Dechor, 1930 (Pierdet 2008, 272); Fig. 2b: Phnom-Penh – Le Monument aux morts, 1931 (ANOM 1925)

places of Cambodia. A permanent and close surveillance is necessary for this area. Means for immediate prosecution must be maintained as the municipal police and constabulary are the only ones to provide order' (NAC 1905).

Before the Second World War, a plan to transfer the European quarters and administration to this 'refreshing and clean area' ('terrain admirablement aéré et salubre') was rejected, and not only for financial reasons: the French and, after independence, Cambodian authorities could not fully bring this part of the town to heel. The French had to content themselves with surveillance by the police (*Sûreté coloniale française*) and with slowly deepening their understanding of the socio-spatial composition of Phnom Penh's 'wild peninsular-west'. As a result of overlapping claims, the situation was complex and land prospectors were sometimes welcomed with stones.³ In 1938, another *Sûreté* report remarked: 'Because of the eccentric situation of Chru-Changwa, the riverine peninsula inhabited by unsettled and disquieting Malays, Chams and Annamites [provides a] hideaway for undesirable fugitives of the Phnom Penh police [...]' (NAC 1938). The Municipality therefore proceeded in a similar fashion by initiating 'colonial bridgeheads' of cadastral order in this outer fringe belt, such as the establishment of waterworks for the capital's supply and a veterinarian livestock station for shipping cattle, as well as the installation of corn-silos.

Order was reinforced through the management of space. Thus, French colonial rule in Phnom Penh appears to be a patchwork colonisation by a 'management of localisation and containment', as it might be called. Conventionally, the specific *modus operandi* of French colonialism is associated with 'mise-en-valeur' and 'mission civilisatrice'.

3.3 Capitalisation and rule

Indeed, colonial space may be viewed as produced by the critical interplay of two procedures converting land into capital as part of a

'civilising process' and capitalising on this land reform to strengthen rule. On the one hand, the physical development of infrastructure using capitalistically exploitable divisions ('plan de lotissements' and 'concessions') rendered Phnom Penh a showcase for the French colonial venture. On the other, the bureaucratic development of grid squares provided the necessary stage for performative acts of colonial presence in the face of the indigenous and expatriate communities. Real estate could be sold, auctioned or assigned as concession. All lots were encumbered with an urban development enforcement order. That is to say, it was only permissible to erect buildings with certain specific functions and within a certain period of time, with possible mitigations in favour of the Municipality. Phnom Penh's formalised parts were mainly developer-driven areas: aligned by a master plan, building lots were to be urbanised by private capital (NAC 1906-1909; ANOM 1891-1892). Most developers' names ('noms des entrepreneurs') here were Chinese (of Cholon-Saigon).

The new 'law and order' could thus be implemented in town – at least partially, as the domains of direct colonial intervention were at the beginning quite limited. Further colonial penetration was achieved both by negotiating an external colonial border with British interests in Siam and subdividing the colony into self-similar administrative units (Forest 1980, 15).

4 The impact of spontaneous settlements on urban morphology: the formation of a 'dual city'

In 1903 the Municipality initiated a headcount of the city's population. The survey was executed street by street in order to assess hygienic status, which enabled the mapping of population distribution for the first time. Due to high fluctuation of sojourners, this represents a demographical snap-shot of the urban space only. Indeed, figures may rise or fall depending on whether the non-permanent inhabitants are included or excluded (ANOM 1907). Nonetheless, it gives a clear picture of a 'dual city'.

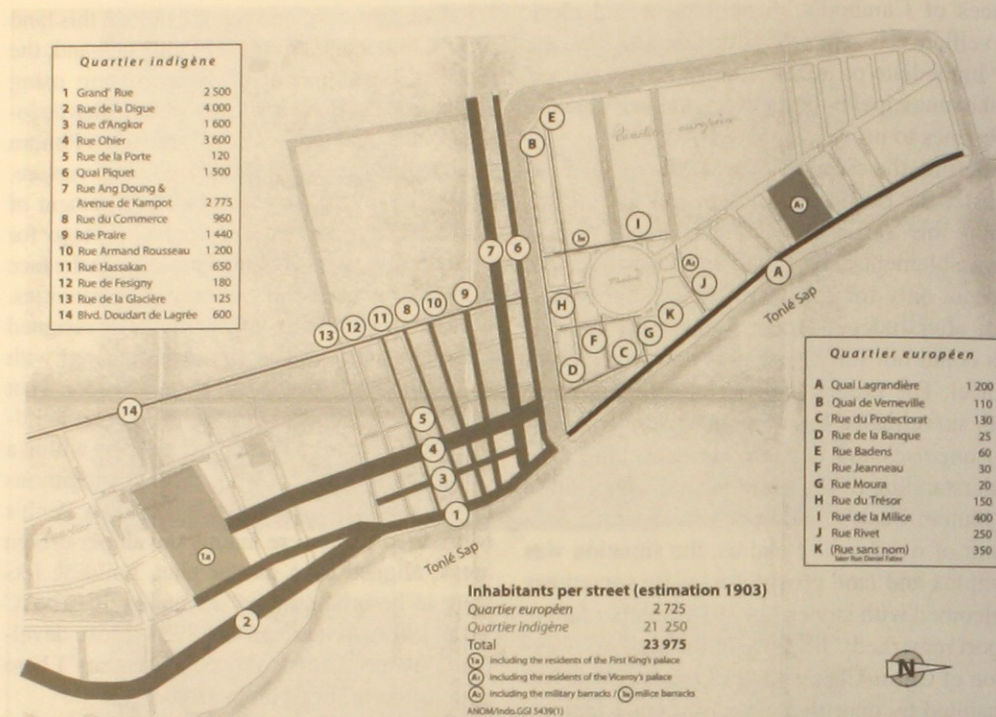


Fig. 3: Population distribution of a 'dual city' (The population density is depicted per 'street')
 Author's draft based on ANOM 1912-1913

Squatter and shanty towns, which were initially only 'visible' in the colonial administration's minutes and protocols but not in the cadastre, were later documented in aerial pictures taken after the First World War. They were concentrated in the southern part of the town for several reasons. First, the prevention or regularisation of 'illegal' settlements according to colonial standards was more rigorous in the northern 'French quarter'. The latter, 'white' part of Phnom Penh was also less attractive for indigenous settlement due to low population density. Taking a close look at Figure 2a, one may identify spontaneous but stationary settlements in the form of a densely ribbon-built village along a causeway west of 'Beng Dechor'. Noteworthy are the distinctly well-trodden trails, as well as the kitchen gardens, small rice fields, and 'aquatic' fields for 'water spinach' (*ipomoea aquatica*, *trokuon* in Khmer) or water lilies and lotus (*nelumbo nucife-*

ra, planted for the seeds, stems and rhizome used in local cuisine or for flower arrangements) in the backyard. The adjacent rice fields and swamps were hunting grounds for edible amphibians, riverine and pond fishes, birds and insects (spiders and beetles, to be eaten braised in peanut butter oil). Phnom Penh was a semi-agrarian town. In 1901, 'Résident-Maire' ('appointed mayor') Leclère counted the cash-crop tree population of the area. He scrupulously listed 74,285 sugar palm trees (*arenga pinnata*, a multi-purpose plant for sugar and vinegar production as well as a provider of lumber and leaves for roofing) and a further 10,433 exploitable trees (NAC 1901). Built on stilts, the typical Cambodian house (Tainturier 2006) gave shelter to a small body of livestock, especially the ubiquitous fowl and pigs, and covered the house's working places underneath (for instance, the family loom or the handicraft workshop).

Finally, in the long term, new land was slowly but continuously formed in the southern quarter by fluvial sedimentation along the Tonle Bassac, creating a permanent 'grey area' for housing along the waterline east of the palace. These un-reinforced river banks were also the preferential mooring place for a special case of flexible settlement: the so-called 'floating villages' of itinerant riverside settlers living on boats or floating houses with their families or family groups.⁴ Before the French intervention, this land belonged formally to the king as 'lord of all the lands and water', but people could enjoy the right of possession if they publicly showed that they were cultivating the adjacent land, building houses or fencing off plots and generally occupying the land in a continuous and peaceful fashion. By contrast, in the French period, all immovable property had to be registered in the cadastre to be legal (Kleinpeter 1937; Land Law of Cambodia 2003).

The spontaneous settlements, to sum up, housed the demographic backbone of the town: the workforce for subordinated colonial service, day labourers and seasonal workers, market-women, and craftsmen. They also provided the indispensable supply of local groceries for Phnom Penh's markets. The overall slow expansion of the 'formal' colonial city allowed a 'self-alignment' of indigenous linear settlements along the edges of the French development in grid format, which brought their inhabitants within walking distance of jobs, markets and infrastructure. As it is today, the two points of minimisation of transport costs and free-riding in terms of infrastructure were decisive for the location and morphology of this type of informal settlement.

Such wide-ranging spontaneous housing activities left a specific imprint on the morphology, with persisting features. To this day, the area north of what was the canal does not have the same level of residential density as the southern part. And due to the auto-development of settlements, its shape has remained slightly irregular (see Fig. 3, street grid numbers 1-5 and 8-13). The locals practiced self-alignment, a typical

form of traditional settlement, which was not perfectly right-angled, placing one house in line with the neighbouring ones. By building and enlarging their 'civil lines' in the centre and their hamlets and villages in the semi-periphery of the city, the local settlers nonetheless prepared the ground for Phnom Penh's further development in rectangular street blocks. The building of houses, the depositing of (organic) waste and the tilling of fields compacted, levelled and paved future city extension areas. Construction work in swampy areas was difficult and costly, but the mere existence of people living there for years or decades greatly facilitated the city's official extension. The French authorities could not forgo these half ready-prepared grounds and decided to develop especially these areas for two reasons: to save infrastructural costs and to display order by rebuilding quarters that originally been considered out of reach (of the colonial drawing board). This long-term process of interactive city development continues well into present times. The spontaneous morphology of roads, lots and fields became fully integrated into French planning procedures and, after independence, the formalized city continued to follow the path laid out by the 'informal' one.⁵ In economic terms: the French civil engineers benefited from this free-riding in the wake of indigenous self-alignments, while the Khmer reaped positive externalities at the same time. The latter's status, however, was precarious in the long run.⁶ Nevertheless, this economic logic produced an equifinal morphology.

5 Residential clientelism – the royal game of socio-spatial politics and its impact on Phnom Penh's urban space

In Cambodia, the planned 'linearisation' of settlement ground (establishment of a grid and other regular pattern) antedates the French colonial agenda for centuries, and not only on a village scale: designed to reflect cosmic geometries, 'Greater Angkor' expanded between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries as an agglomeration

of consecutive urban centres. The Khmer rulers (*devarajas*) sought to manifest and aggrandise their royal aura and with temple mountains (state temples) and palace complexes in the centre of their realm (Evans et al. 2007). Phnom Penh, as the king's new royal seat (after the court moved from Udong to the 'quatre bras' 1865/66), carried forward this concept, but *en miniature* (Lamant 1991). The new site continued to be the 'symbol and substance' (Paravicini 2005) of royal power. In addition to its symbolic component as the 'navel' of the Khmer world, the residence town was substantial for rule in two ways: first as the main concentration site of the population and thus the most important market place of the kingdom; second as an organized gathering place for court society. The inner royal domain or 'kromomuong', literally 'residence, town and closest surroundings', bears a double meaning as site and socio-spatial order (ANOM 1884b; ANOM 1904-1914). Proximity to the king increased one's opportunities for work, promotion and profit, while the king was able to preside over an inner circle face-to-face. Phnom Penh was the king's power base in any respect and the real kernel of direct rule, whereas royal authority diminished at the periphery of the kingdom according to centrifugal logic.

The palace formed the spatial midpoint where the king concentrated his network of loyalties (Népote 1973). Reciprocity was the foundation of the king's power; centripetal forces of obligations and loyalties towards his person kept the realm together (Mikaelian 2009, 193). Yet Phnom Penh represented the centre of a 'Personenverbandstaat' ('early form of state defined by political and socio-economical associations of people') with loose boundaries, not the capital of a territorial state with clearly defined borders (Winichaukul 1997).

The last attempt to preserve the old network order centring formally on king and palace was solicited by Khmer dignitaries of the 'administration mixte' in 1900, when the French members of the committee laid the *de facto* foundation for a territorial colonial polity. The traditional administrative circles, following suggestions

by the king's representatives, were rejected and replaced by French-style 'quartiers' consecutively numbered from north to south, placing the palace borough only in third position. The 'village catholique' of Vietnamese Christians in the northwest, including the so-called 'cathedral' (a missionary church that functioned as the see of the titular bishop for the apostolic vicariate of Cambodia) now officially became part of the Municipality of Phnom Penh (Ponchaud 1990; Forest 2012, 229-249).

In the aftermath of the French *coup d'état* in 1884, king Norodom politically lost ground in the grand scheme, but he was able to preserve some of his influence over the years due to his position as state pensioner and his private enterprise as a rent seeker.⁷ This constituted the king's last resort. The French did not have the administrative manpower to remove the king from office; nor could they risk endangering the social peace by doing so (Cooke 2007, 39). The sacred nature of his status was too strong for that, but not strong enough to prevent Norodom and his successors from becoming mere 'state notaries' for French Cambodia (Samnang 1998, 312).

Similar to the market area further north, the street grid around the palace was (and still is) slightly out of alignment. The cartographer of the cadastre reproduced the irregular plots of land of fragmented ownership and tenancy (NAC 1913). This lot structure represents the morphological phenotype of the king's three-pronged style of rule and management of real estate. Property and premises were either assigned as donations or sold as crown land adjacent to the palace. Hereby the king acted in three ways: (1) as businessman, making him landlord of tenements ('Chinese shophouses'⁸); (2) as *pater familias*, presenting valuable land to the numerous members of the royal family; (3) as head of state, by making gifts as bonding practice, in the terminology of Marcel Mauss (1973). Usually such plots of land were subdivided, subcontracted or resold; rented out and sublet, sometimes in series, from the top echelons to the ordinary (wo)men of the society. It took years and decades for

the French to unscramble these chains of sale or rent and to end subcontracting and, sometimes, sub-subcontracting of land which ought to have been inalienable since 1884. The last trace of this practice found in the archives by the author was recorded in the early 1940s (NAC 1942).

The cadastral disempowerment of the king in terms of estate ownership only set in as late as 1909, the date of the first detailed investigation of the crown entail, which listed ca. 53,000 square metres of real estate that had been 'alienated' to princes, princesses,⁹ royal officials and smallholders around the walled palace precinct. Further inventory of the 'biens de la couronne' (i.e. crown land and private royal property) by the French identified ca. 75,000 square metres of royal claims in 1914, which were finally accepted by the colonial administration (NAC 1914). This prime real estate had to be brought under the control of the Municipality to stop 'illegal' house building (NAC 1906-1909), to extend beautification to this area by creating green public spaces and to start a programme of upgrades to the existing building structure. Even though it was formally entitled to forfeit most estates, the French administration decided to pay appropriate compensation. Any other action would have been regarded as 'illegal' in traditional contracting and would have harmed the colonial administration's declared object to perform 'good governance' for all: the 'mission civilisatrice' had repercussive restrictions on governing even in favour of the ordinary man or woman on the street.

6 The equifinality of Phnom Penh's morphology – a conclusion

All things considered, who was the actual constructor of the city? The officially approved constructions were built by royals and well-to-do individuals – including royal favourites, other private estate developers –, the French Municipality and its protégés.¹⁰ What is missing in the official picture are the historical 'informal settlements' – the living spaces of the majority

of the civil population. One may wonder why spontaneous city building has been conceptually undervalued in studies of the (colonial) past in general, and of French Indochina in particular. It seems that the prevailing master narrative of colonial city planning was (and still is) empirically difficult to 'counter-narrate'. The official records hold only sporadic information of city development 'from below'. Thus, it is easy to mistake the French administration's view of 'the' plan as a continuous and successful endeavour to build Phnom Penh. This view has been uncritically reproduced by modern city planners reflecting on historical development, and by historians who have not systematically examined city development as a bargaining process.

By the 1860s, Phnom Penh had not only become a 'key actor' and structure of the colonial enterprise in the region; it had also retained room for the indigenous *ancien régime* to obstruct and slow down the take-over by the French. In addition, it provided some newcomers with the opportunity to rise in the social ranks or – more moderately – to earn a living. With its dense urban environment, the kingdom-colony's most important agglomeration created more prospects for the inhabitants than smaller suburban or rural networks: 'informality' became a mode of life and a mode of urbanization (Roy 2005). Questions of the ways in which agglomerative economies generate benefits as 'externalities' have been widely debated in urban economics (Glaeser 2011; Storper/Venables 2004). This article has shown that in Phnom Penh, the common (wo)man, notwithstanding his/her ethnic background, combined precarious job opportunities with marketable agrarian production and handicraft to boost the family's income pool. Urban life thus provided mixed subsistence to its inhabitants, while the colonial government could tax and recruit labour. These symbiotic and asymbiotic relationships structured an equifinal urban morphology.

By doing so, informal settlers participated in colonial 'social engineering'. The French infrastructural work became a materialisation of the government's policy and thus by itself

an expanding agency of colonial law enforcement. Two planning agendas were at work: (1) spontaneous building, which aggregated into a morphological order similar to the (2) mapped city planning by the French officials. Together they form an orthogonal city-tissue. However, the spontaneous building activity 'from below' foreclosed, directed and partially impeded the plans 'from above'. Capital-intensive engineering (e. g. canals) provided by this very town authority supplied an attractive building site for spontaneous settlements. The reality of Phnom Penh's street morphology emerged out of two contingent practices (morphological continuum). In other words, both sets of activities, though subjectively pursuing different goals, were in the end instrumental in establishing the same urban tissue. Thus, each of the two groups of actors was necessary for the other one's actions. It is this very necessity that initiated their coordination, rather than the convergence of their goals. Their sequential equifinality proves the compatibility of these two modes of production of a common physical urban space, encouraged by the following two factors.

First, 'racial' segregation was not introduced by the French colonial administration but constituted the result of a tendency to 'ethnic self-segregation' by Khmers, Annamites Christians, Europeans, Chinese or Sino-Khmers, Chams or Indians. The French only tried to consolidate this fact spatially by their 'management by localisation and containment', also segregating the respectable 'white' population from the colonial embarrassment of the literally 'barefooted' Frenchmen ('des va-nu-pieds', ANOM 1869). Second, the compact colonial city as projected by the French had been anticipated by the dense but illegal 'civil lines' of the various informal settlements. In Phnom Penh, the planned gradual extension of the colonial city basically followed the spontaneous continuous expansion of the informal settlements.

In Phnom Penh, periods of slow(er) urban extension gave more weight to spontaneous settlements acting as building pioneers, while phases of more rapid, technically advanced

and capital-intensive production of urban space resulted in the building of new lots beyond this pre-prepared ground. In colonial times, city extension accelerated only in the interwar period. After independence in 1954, a second momentum of urbanisation is evident and may be linked to the typical post-colonial urban growth of a capital city, accompanied by a general demographic increase. However, the extreme social-demographic ruptures of the Khmer Rouge era (1975-79) led to radical developments in terms of informal urbanisation (Kolnberger 2015). The present-day controversy surrounding evictions and resettlements of thousands of people, mostly by force, highlights the importance of and the potential for conflict and cooperation in the formal-informal city building process (STT 2011). In their article, Herrle and Fokdal raised the question whether '[informality] exists as an almost ubiquitous aspect of any urban life independent its political or economic or even historical formation' (2011, 7). Phnom Penh, both as colonial city and independent capital, shows the 'formal-informal' dialectic as a decisive mode of shaping physical as well as social or political environments.

Last but not least, a desideratum for further studies: in recent years research on Phnom Penh's remarkable urban history has been asymmetrically focused on 'after the Khmer Rouge'. However, the city's (extreme) conjunctures of urban development offer a probably unique opportunity to investigate analogies, continuity and change of urban life between past and present. Social and political geography usefully complement this historical perspective.

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- NAC (1887): Convention relative à l'aliénation des terrains au Cambodge, Art. 7, 1887, NAC, RSC 16323.
- NAC (1890): Port de Pnom Penh: Réglementation de la vitesse des bateaux à vapeur et délimitation de la zone réservée aux embarcations royales, ca. 1890s, NAC, RSC? (displaced document, new classification/fascicle number unknown), see Kolnberger 2014, 122.
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- NAC (1906-1909): Plan d'avancement des travaux, service des Ponts et Chaussées, 10 juillet 1897, NAC, RSC 2807(1), PC 1/2. (inserted pricing map: Logement des indigènes à la prison centrale du protectorat à Phnom Penh, 1906-1909, NAC, RSC 99958.
- NAC (1908-1919): Commission des terrains de Phnom Penh, Service du cadastre, ville de Phnom Penh, origine et historique des parcelles, 1908-1919, RM à RSC, 23-25 mars 1909, NAC, RSC 12595.
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- NAC (1924): L'affaire Chhun', ANOM, Indo.RSC 495.
- NAC (1927): List dressed up by the Ministère du Palais Royal, des Finances et des Beaux-Arts, NAC, RSC 29414.
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- NAC (1992): Box 18/1. Eviction Cases, Casino Zone, UNTAC-Memo, 21 August 1992, NAC, UNTAC [United Nation Transitional Authority in Cambodia, 1992-93].

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- 1 Actually the *coup d'état* in Cambodia was a 'constitutional coup', a unilateral cancellation of the protectorate's contract by the French to end the power-sharing at the top, which bears a striking parallel to the rise of administrative power in metropolitan France and development from a system of rule shared with local notables to further state building and bureaucratic modernisation (Raphael 2006).
- 2 'Dysfunktionaler Freiraum', as defined by German spatial planning terminology, refers to space without a clear functional dedication, leaving ample scope for multiple land use.
- 3 A social climber of modest local origins in Phnom Penh's colonial society, Alexis Chhun (1851-1924?), who became the highest ranking court bureaucrat, acquired, purchased and obviously grabbed land in the most valuable part of the lower peninsular; see the voluminous file of 'L'affaire Chhun' (NAC 1924, Muller, 2006, 89).
- 4 In this area 'history was repeating itself' when hundreds, and later thousands, of squatters settled there during the resettlement process of Phnom Penh after the fall of the Khmer Rouge (1979/80). According to the UN authorities, their total number reached 36,000 before they were forcibly evicted (see the UN report NAC 1992).
- 5 Cf. the figure-ground diagram of Phnom Penh's urban space from before 1890 to 1994 published by a French-Cambodian team in 1997. The plan sequence represents a teleological view of Phnom Penh's city extensions forming a regular fabric of streets and building blocks and 'villages'. Nevertheless, what is clearly visible is that 'formal city space' has been gradually encroaching on 'informal city space' (APUR 1997, 26-27).

- 6 The mobility of people and building materials counterbalanced this precarious situation: moving to the next location of self-alignment (sometimes only a couple of meters away) for the sake of urbanisation and localisation externalities created new common property resources.
- 7 In 1891, Norodom accepted a kind of 'all-inclusive' apanage from the French, offered in compensation for the transfer of all tax sovereignty to the colonial administration (ANOM 1883-1891). He successfully opened up alternative financial resources through a flourishing new revenue farming system (Cooke 2007).
- 8 In urban Southeast Asia, 'shophouses' are usually two or three stories high, with a shop for mercantile activity on the ground floor and apartments or living rooms above.
- 9 After the turn of the century, French officials, with rare exceptions only, used European aristocratic rank-titles, replacing the traditional Khmer ones (NAC 1927).
- 10 Even without land registration, building permits could be issued after the fact when it was in the interest of the colonial project – sometimes with astonishing speed, e.g. for the titular bishop of Phnom Penh at the 'village catholique', the missionary settlement, mainly inhabited by Christians from Vietnam (NAC 1906).