C o n f e r e n c e P r o p o s a l (accepted)

XVII ISA World Congress of Sociology, Gothenburg 2010

Research Committee on Regional and Urban Development RC21

**Session 8: The upsurge of urban waterscapes: theoretical and empirical investigations**

by Thomas Kolnberger, University of Luxembourg / University of Passau (Germany)

Fernando Diaz Orueta, [Fernando.diaz@ua.es](mailto:Fernando.diaz@ua.es)

Kuniko Fujita, [fujitak@msu.edu](mailto:fujitak@msu.edu)

Susanne Frank, [susanne.frank@tu-dortmund.de](mailto:susanne.frank@tu-dortmund.de)

Sandra Huning, [huning@bbaw.de](mailto:huning@bbaw.de)

**Between swampy backwaters and “golden” riverside: the water frontiers of Phnom Penh, Cambodia in historical perspective**

Colonial Phnom Penh used to be an amphibious urban landscape, tucked between canals and the riversides of the Mekong, Tonle Sap and Bassac. Periodically filled up lakes and swamps during the monsoon – a kind of marshland locally called *boeung* – still dot the town area. However, the agricultural lands around the swamps and the sites of “floating villages” (motley throngs of boats & houses on stilts) along the riversides, once neglected, are now a golden playground for developers’ extravaganzas.

Today in Cambodia, power is money and money (and not land-property) is power. The rapid expansion of the city in all directions is driven by the need for construction plots to attract direct investments. As in the past, the role and meaning of the urban waterscape is changing. The history of Phnom Penh offers a unique case study for persistency and adaptation in the interaction of people, water, and land. This paper will present the transforming perspectives, and the symbolic and social connotations of the urban waterscapes of this Southeast Asian city since its (re)founding in French colonial times (with references to the “hydraulic cities” of the ancient Khmer) providing insights to today’s changes in a *longue durée.*

Contact & affiliation:

Thomas Kolnberger

Junior researcher, MA, PhD-cand.

*University of Luxembourg* *Universität Passau*

FLSHASE Institut für Südostasienkunde II

(Faculté des Lettres, des Sciences Humaines, (Festland)

des Arts et des Sciences de l'Education) Innstraße 43

Research Unit IPSE D-94032 Passau, Germany

(Identités, Politiques, Sociétés, Espace)

Route de Diekirch

L-7220 Walferdange, Luxembourg

[thomas.kolnberger@uni.lu](mailto:thomas.kolnberger@uni.lu)

**Slide 1**

First of all, thank you for the opportunity to present my paper here.

As you can see on the satellite image, the Metropolitan area of Phnom Penh still is an amphibious landscape. This urban waterscape has two elements:

a) a waterfront

b) a water frontier

The settlement pattern in Cambodia’s history is predominantly `linear´, i.e. the man-made built environment is lining up houses – like a string of pearls – along flood proof riversides or along artificial causeways on dikes.

That building tradition is promoting low density settlement patterns, however to exercise political power, any ruler of Cambodia needed to concentrate people (quite a challenge in any monsoon climate & landscape): the ancient Khmer created the (**quote**) “world’s largest pre-industrial low density settlement complex”; a kind of “L.A.”, if you replace the motorways by waterways, as an `urban sprawl´ of stilted houses and floating villages around a sacral center with state temple, palace & irrigation works.

In the second half of the 19th cent., the French introduced a different concept: the compact city. When Indochina with Cambodia as `Protectorate´ (1863-1953) became a French colony, the urban administrators & planners changed the land-water interface fundamentally: to create an artificial platform to be urbanized, the amphibious hinterland of their settlements gradually disappeared by large-scale land fillings.

Secondly, the waterfront (and not the sacral centre) became the urban show side of the `mission civilisatrice´ (French version of US manifest destiny). As royal residences and their entourage tended to `migrate´ – to change sites from time to time – in the past, the durable settlement should demonstrate: we are here, we are going to stay and we build a window to the modern and progressive (Western) world: the waterfront used to be the gateway and prestigious strip of French colonialism.

**Slide 2 – 3**

Explanation

- complex hydrological regime with countless lesser water bodies

- meeting & junction of three rivers

**Slide 4**

After sketching Phnom Penh’s water frontiers, let me introduce two further assumptions:

Phnom Penh is – according to Hoyle’s classification – a `primitive port city´, i.e. the function & site of the port have never been migrated. City & port stayed together. However, you can observe common features of urban restructuring and design like in `classical examples´ (London, Boston et al.)

The same phenotype, but different `historical genotype´

The reason for that is the second point I would like to present: The riverside as the pivotal strip for Cambodia’s modern history

**Slide 5**

The Khmer Rouge forcefully evicted all town dwellers during their reign of terror.

5 years later in 1979, the Vietnamese invaded and liberated Cambodia. Under their aegis the new men-in-power made a `new spatial deal´ to impose political & economical checks-and-balances.

**Slide 5 - 6**

The government departments were grouping around the most prestigious sites (on the waterfront and around the palace). The influx of the returning population was strictly (at least in the beginning) controlled. The ministers and high functionaries could select their followers. The deal was: loyalty in exchange for basic human needs (housing, work, access to foreign aid). The redistribution of urban space happened to be the resurrection of urban life from scratch plus the original accumulation of political power for the elites.

They formed `gated-communities´ as self-sustaining units to integrate working, living and political control.

These `cités´ were the base for patronage and clientelism – until today.

**Slide 7**

**Next step**: the original accumulation of capital

The Cold War ended, and the international community finally agreed to end the 3rd Indochina War with a peace mission of the UN in Cambodia.

The cornucopia of the UNTAC in cash & in kind – a 1.6 billion US$ budget – was poured over Phnom Penh.

The NGOs rented the villas of the `socialist´ elites in the West of the city, these reinvested the profits for new `UNTAC´-villas: the first construction boom

**Slide 8**

**Back to the future for the waterfront:**

The municipality’s policy is a return to time before Khmer Rouge: the waterfront as showpiece. First, the spontaneous harbor facilities were demolish & a beautifications measures were taken.

**Slide 9 - 13**

**Back to the future for the waterfrontier**:

Acceleration land filling – eviction of urban poor from the city center / especially from the lake-&-waterfront

Property-led development took over from `pure´ municipality planning (master plan is sometimes a piece of paper only)