

first stop
cambodia...
One journalist's start in Phnom Penh



Photo by Hok Sokol

This house, right, located in Kompong Cham province exemplifies Cambodia's kantaing home style. In this scene, below, from the epic tale Reamker painted at the royal palace in the early 1900s, Preah Ream flies over Cambodian homes of rong dol design.

the history of home

For hundreds of years, Cambodian architectural traditions have prevailed despite modernization

BY MICHELLE VACHON • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

As far back as illustrations go, Cambodians have built wooden homes according to certain set designs and styles that still dot the contemporary landscape, whether in Oddar Meanchey or Takeo provinces.

It is difficult, however, to say why Cambodians came up with a four-slope roof, or why people in Battambang province favored the rong doeung roof style with two slopes at the top and four slopes in the lower part, said Hok Sokol, an architect and expert on Khmer traditional wooden architecture.

"The Khmer traditional house took many years to develop, from the time of our ancestors and from generation to generation," Hok Sokol said.

"Having traditional buildings on or over water is an ancient tradition, and it's not uncommon for houses to be floating or on stilts," art historian Darryl Collins said.

"Even in village situations...the houses are actually close to water sources."

On a map of Lovek, Cambodia's capital in the 16th century, the city appears surrounded by water with rows of small wooden houses in the middle, Collins said.

In the 1960s, architect Vann Molyvann would draw inspiration from traditional styles to build his One Hundred Houses for the National Bank of Cambodia: Raised on concrete columns, the houses were for the most part made of wood, their roofs designed for free air circulation and rooms for cross-ventilation, he said.



Photo by Hok Sokol



Photo by Darryl Collins



Photo by Hok Sokol



Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Cambodia

Traditional homes of kaing style are depicted in a wall painting, top right, of the royal palace dating from the early 20th Century. The length of this traditional house's stilts, left, makes art historians believe it was located near the Tonle Sap lake whose water levels vary markedly according to seasons. The photo dates from the 1920s. Detail of woodwork produced by today's Cambodian craftsmen, top left, for a new house.

Hok Sokol and Collins delivered a lecture on Khmer traditional homes last week as part of the "Architecture + Urban Design Month" activities in Phnom Penh and demonstrated the endurance of Cambodian homes. While the Khmers built their temples in brick and stone, they seem to have always preferred wood for their homes, Collins said. At the Bayon temple, 800-year-old wall carvings feature people cooking in a wooden house with a tile roof, he said.

Today, about six traditional home designs can be seen throughout the country, Hok Sokol said.

"There are slight differences from province to province, but the general concepts, styles and proportions are the same," he said.

Houses in Kompong Cham province tend to be smaller but decorated with elaborate carvings—the province has been known for its craftsmen—and their interiors divided into rooms, while houses in Kratie province usually are large, open-floor plan affairs, Hok Sokol said.

Held together by wooden wedges, decorative pins or simple wooden dowels, Khmer traditional houses can—and often are—moved to different locations, he said.

"You will find an abundance of wooden houses in the countryside because they complement an agricultural lifestyle, and the greatest percentage of Cambodians still are farmers," Collins said.

But they are becoming scarce in urban areas, he said.

"When I came to Phnom Penh in 1994, you could still see many wooden houses. If you go around Phnom Penh today, you'll hardly find any in the central area...They are being replaced with brick, concrete and

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—DARRYL COLLINS • ART HISTORIAN

glass structures which require air conditioning," unlike wood which breathes, Collins said.

"Of course the country develops, and concrete is used worldwide," Hok Sokol said.

However, traditional wooden designs can be modified to accommodate today's requirements, with concrete used when needed such as for bathrooms or kitchens, he added.

Building a wooden home today could be comparable in price to a good-quality concrete one and, depending on the amount of woodwork a person chooses to have done, craftsmanship may cost as much as materials, Hok Sokol said. A new Khmer style is developing in wooden houses, he added.

As for century-old wooden homes and pagodas, some of them deserve to be preserved, Collins said. "It's not a matter of saving everything. It's a matter of saving the best and fine examples, of preserving some sense of lineage...of wooden heritage of excellent quality."

"It's the same with historic buildings at any period of time: you don't preserve everything. You make judgment and selection," Collins said. ■