

# Phnom Penh: Beyond the Past, Towards the Future



The Royal Palace. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities

By 2050, almost 4 in 10 residents in Cambodia will live in an urban area<sup>1</sup>. The country is expected to urbanise at an average rate of 2.5% annually over the next 35 years and this is perhaps most evident in its capital of Phnom Penh. Not only is this city the most populous in Cambodia, with close to 2.8 million citizens<sup>2</sup>, it also attracts some three-quarters of the country's industrial investment and houses a similar proportion of its transportation network.<sup>3</sup>

Phnom Penh's development as a city began in 1865 when Cambodia's then French rulers designated it the first royal capital. The introduction of customary land laws, streets and public spaces transformed Phnom Penh into a Parisian-styled city with wide boulevards and green spaces. In 1950, Phnom Penh's first masterplan was introduced to re-zone areas for industrialisation and increase housing density. However, this French plan was stalled when Cambodia became independent in 1953. Between 1956 to 1970, Phnom Penh doubled in size and witnessed a rise in nationalism as local architects introduced Khmer flair to key buildings such as its National Olympic Stadium. The forward-looking movement ended with the rise of the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s. Amidst an ensuing civil war, many citizens moved out of Phnom Penh, and the city stalled in development.<sup>4</sup>

1 <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/286991511862455372/pdf/121692-REVISED-Phnom-Penh-Urban-report-V8-V-low.pdf>

2 <https://www.clc.gov.sg/docs/default-source/books/book-asean-smart-cities-network.pdf>

3 <http://phnompenh.gov.kh/en/phnom-penh-city/facts/>

4 [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/Global\\_Report/pdfs/PhnomPenh.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/Global_Report/pdfs/PhnomPenh.pdf)



Located in the newly refurbished Phnom Penh City Authority (PPCA) building is a scale model showcasing the future development of the city. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities

The city is recovering from this turbulent and complex past. In 1998, urban development became Cambodia's top agenda, but this was an uphill challenge as many of the city's plans and documents had been destroyed.<sup>5</sup> It was not until the end of 2015 that Phnom Penh adopted a new Land Use Masterplan and also began working on an Urban Transport Masterplan with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). CLC and TF Intl hosted Phnom Penh's city officials in Singapore on a few occasions, for example, at the Temasek Foundation International (TF Intl) Leaders in Urban Governance Programme, and the ASEAN Smart Cities Network meetings where these plans were discussed as the city's priority agenda.

### **A Rapidly-Growing Metropolis**

Phnom Penh is building upon what it has inherited from the French. Its planning efforts are focused around its major parks and boulevards such as Norodom and Monivong. They include incorporating more blue and green elements, improving the city zoning, rejuvenating the sidewalks and managing the unplanned growth and congestion. Some of these efforts were on display when CLC and TF Intl visited Phnom Penh in October 2018.

Driving out from Phnom Penh's airport, one sees the many construction projects being undertaken by foreign firms. Construction is one of Cambodia's main industry bases. Such intense foreign interest and construction are added impetus to develop proper master plans and zoning regulations that ensure the rapid growth is not haphazard. For instance, as high-rise buildings spring up across the city, especially near the busy downtown, the state has restricted such development in some areas. Development around the Phnom Penh Royal Palace is restricted in height to retain the low-rise profile of the locale.

<sup>5</sup> <http://sea-globe.com/the-master-plan/>





The Phnom Penh Royal Palace (bottom centre) is flanked by low-rise buildings while high-rise buildings are set further inland from the riverbank to maintain planning regularity and aesthetics.



The offices of the Phnom Penh City Authority (PPCA) was previously an old church.



A dilapidated building—one of the many historic treasures that can be conserved to breathe new life in Phnom Penh's Old Quarter. This is located behind the Foreign Correspondent's Club.



The One Window Centre for municipal services in the PPCA.

To ensure proper management of the city, Phnom Penh has also centralised its governance in the Phnom Penh City Authority (PPCA). This is overseen by a Governor who is assisted by five Vice-Governors and a Chief Administrator. The authority operates from an old church compound that has since been restored. Besides serving as an office, the conserved building also has a One Window Centre located in its lobby that offers various municipal services including helping citizens register new birth and addresses .

### **Better Streets for All**

Various efforts have been undertaken to improve Phnom Penh's streets and sidewalks. Among the 11 streets being slated for rejuvenation, a major project is at Norodom Boulevard. This is the main street linking visitors from the airport to the city's Downtown, and it passes by government buildings, embassies and its iconic Independence Monument. Norodom Boulevard's sidewalks are being re-laid to ensure that its bricks are even. Plants are also being introduced to ensure the visually handicapped and people with disabilities don't bump into existing trees grown on the sidewalks.



On-going works to improve the current sidewalk in Norodom Boulevard.  
Source: Centre for Liveable Cities



Wat Phnom is a popular spot with both locals and tourists.  
Source: Centre for Liveable Cities



These steps leading up to the temple were retained to preserve the place's heritage. However, similar steps surrounding it were flattened. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities



The new granite pavements make it easier for access, including for those on wheelchair. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities



Drain slates are designed to be easy to maintain, especially by women. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities

Another major rejuvenation effort is at Phnom Penh's "ground zero", Wat Phnom, from which 25 provinces sprung up around. This temple has existed since 1372 and is the tallest religious structure in the city as it is located 27 metres above ground. To make the surrounding of this popular tourist spot more accessible and pleasant, the government flattened the pavement below the temple and replaced it with granite tiles to prevent the growth of moss which made the grounds slippery. Fences have also been erected around the area and there is a new policy of disallowing street vendors to ensure the pavements are safe and clear for visitors. To make it easy to upkeep the Wat Phnom area, the government has also implemented simple improvements. For example, drain slates are kept small and come in single pieces so that cleaners can easily remove them when carrying out their work. These efforts to spruce up Wat Phnom have changed how citizens behave. While some once even bathed at the sidewalks, they now take pride in keeping this common space welcoming for all.

6 <https://www.construction-property.com/read-news-1202/>





A water taxi that now travels along the waterways of Phnom Penh.



The new bus depot near Preah Phnov. The Japanese government supported this development through JICA, and donated buses such as this one in the photograph. Cambodia's partnership with JICA goes back some 65 years.

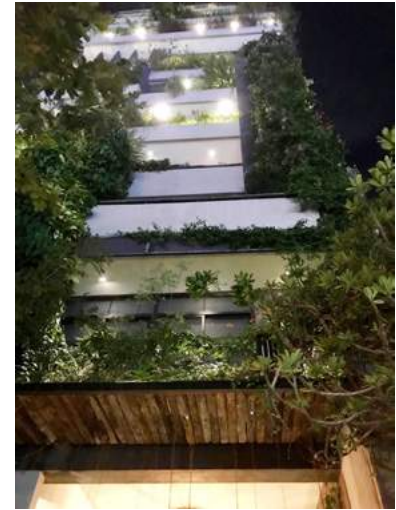


A map of the bus network in Phnom Penh. Source: Phnom Penh City Authority

## Improving Connectivity and Traffic

Phnom Penh's waterfront along the Mekong delta has been transformed into a lifestyle district. The boat people who used to live here have been re-located to another section of the river and several interim developments introduced to activate the land. There are now one-storey F&B establishments that add vibrancy to the waterfront. During our visit, people were running along it or simply enjoying the breeze in the evenings.

On the waters are also now two water taxi services introduced since April 2018. This is part of the city's priority effort to improve connectivity with new modes of transport. In our discussions with Vice-Governor Nuon Pharat, it was evident that his administration was keen to tackle the city's traffic congestion and rampant, haphazard parking on the sidewalks. Most buildings in the city were built without parking spaces but it is heavily reliant on private modes of transport. Through its Urban Transport Masterplan, Phnom Penh wants to build a solid public transport network. This is supported by the city's ASCN partnerships which all involve the use of bus analytics, data collection and tracking.



On the rooftop of Tronum is the rooftop bar, Vehaa, which uses tree barks as supporting structures.

In addition to a water taxi service, which was initially complimentary to encourage its use, there are now public buses plying 13 routes around Phnom Penh. These were granted by the Japanese, Korean and Chinese governments. Bus fares are fixed at USD 37-cents per trip and free for the elderly, students, monks and factory workers. While newer buses serve the inner city, older buses ply the outside so they would not cause a traffic jam in the event that they broke down. A new bus depot is being built with JICA's support near the Preah Phnov Satellite City. This upcoming development promises to offer affordable public housing, a zoo and a stadium — all of which will be completed in time for the 2023 Southeast Asian Games.

### Cambodia on the Rise

The World Bank recently re-classified Cambodia from a low-income to a middle-income country<sup>7</sup>. Such progress after years of strife and disruption can be credited to the young and energetic administrators such as those we met in Phnom Penh. The city's chief administrator, Seng, is also an architect with a private practice. We visited the Tronum Serviced Apartments that he designed, a building with a façade of vertical greenery that is a refreshing sight in the busy downtown.<sup>8</sup> The green theme extends into the building with interiors decked out with abundant wood. Tronum is also topped with a popular rooftop bar that has tree bodies as supporting structures. Seng said the extensive greenery was inspired by his personal memories of growing up in Cambodia and also to counter the increasing concretisation that has come with Phnom Penh's urbanisation.<sup>9</sup> When asked why he continued serving in the public service instead of solely running a private practice, Seng said it was hard to turn away from working for the government despite the longer time horizons because of the wider impact he can have on the lives of Phnom Penh residents working in government, tackling the many urban improvement projects in Phnom Penh.

<sup>7</sup> <http://blogs.worldbank.org/eastasiapacific/cambodia-is-now-a-lower-middle-income-economy-what-does-this-mean>

<sup>8</sup> <http://sea-globe.com/the-master-plan>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-property/upscale-botanical-serviced-apartments-opens-sothea-bldg>

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# About the Writer



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Nisha works on international capacity development programmes in Urban Governance at CLC. She was part of the team that launched the ASEAN Smart Cities Network, and was with the WCS team where she also managed the global WCS Young Leaders Network. She was previously a Crime Analyst, and developed capacity building programmes in safety and security with the Ministry of Home Affairs.

## **About CLC**

The Centre for Liveable Cities was set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development. Guided by its mission to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities, the Centre's work spans four main areas - Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms and Advisory. The CLC Lecture Series is a platform for urban experts to share their knowledge with other practitioners. For more information, please visit us at <http://www.clc.gov.sg>