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## Forced displacements in Cambodia: Creative re-appropriation practices versus current models of urban development

*Forced evictions are commonplace in the developing world, mainly due to the need to repurpose land for allegedly higher order enterprises. In this post, **Camillo Boano and Giorgio Talocci** discuss their research with two relocation sites that originated from the same eviction in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. By looking at these cases, they show how newly-formed settlements can follow diametrically different paths: whereas one conforms to the current model of social development, the other one contests this model through home-grown urbanity practices.*

A longer version of this post appeared in *Pacific Geographies* (2015), 43(1), 15-20.

Cambodia's urban condition, in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime, has resulted in a unique set of development processes both in terms of how the urban is planned and how it is manifested and lived on the ground by the Cambodian people.

During the Khmer Rouge regime cities were evacuated, left to deteriorate in the pursuit of an agrarian-based society. In the years that followed the civil war, the people of Cambodia slowly picked up the pieces and cities were re-inhabited, urban trajectories were reignited, both out of the shadows of the war and with a fresh restart without predetermined direction. Layered with the country's challenges of post-war stabilisation Phnom Penh is transitioning quickly with the vision of being a leading

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economic power amongst its Southeast Asian counterparts. Foreign (and local) investment is seeing the city landscape change at almost an unrecognisable rate and with a frenzy of haphazard, short-sighted and individualistic objectives. In the last few years, Phnom Penh's citizens have witnessed an endless number of fierce forced evictions—precisely 85 between 1990 and 2012—due to enormous economic pressures over land in central areas, which propelled demolitions of informal settlements and expulsions of their inhabitants in order to make room for new upper-class developments, gigantic malls and, in a few cases, new infrastructures and services.

In this post we wish to discuss two relocation sites, Borei Santepheap Pi and Oudong Moi. Both originated from the eviction of Dey Krahom, a very central informal settlement evicted on the 24 January 2009 to make room for a new development by 7NG Group, one of the most important construction and investment companies in Cambodia. After the failure of a land-sharing proposal for Dey Krahom, 7NG Group offered a land-swap to the community, a relocation site far from the city centre where the families would have been given a housing unit for free after entering a savings programme. In spite of sharing a common origin (and a common 'landlord' too, 7NG itself) Borei Santepheap Pi and Oudong Moi recount almost opposite stories—the former being a relocation site where everything (housing, infrastructure, services, education, employment, microfinance) was provided by 7NG; the latter, instead, was given simple virgin land where people were literally dumped.

### **Borei Santepheap Pi (Domnak Trayoeung)**

Borei Santepheap Pi develops about 20km South-West of Phnom Penh, hardly accessible from the centre of the city. The size of the site is huge: 2000 households over about 25 hectares. Although it was born to host the families evicted from Dey Krahom, with time it has 'collected' people evicted from other surrounding areas and it does include a commercial development by 7NG, with a percentage of houses sold at market prices—mechanism that contributed to cross-subsidise the construction of units assigned to the evictees for free<sup>[1]</sup>.

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At first sight, the landscape is a simple flat land dotted with sparsely developed factories and small villages. At the entrance of the site there is just a gas station and a small

“we-got-all-basic-goods” sign purporting a sort of official ‘gate’ to the site —there is no further structure, nor a board[2]. Beyond the gate, an infinite array of houses, same typology repeated endlessly. The housing stock was in fact designed as incremental: every family would have received exactly the same rectangular unit, in armed concrete, and then be able to expand in height in the future. The rationale behind this was to recreate the conditions for the successful typology of the shop-house. So far, though, economic activities have not flourished at all in Borei Santepheap Pi, and the general impression is one of a ghost city. It is interesting to see the contrast between the current situation and the way 7NG Group[3] imagined the project, as it was presented as a kind of promised land: the place where parents find work, children have access to education, and there are proper health clinics. They spoke of “occupation, small businesses, market, factory works”, showing how the on-site facilities would work efficiently, using pictures of a market, a classroom, a paediatric clinic, a factory, all built by 7NG.

The reality though is very different from the one portrayed by 7NG when presenting the project. Many houses were never occupied, or have been left empty after a short period of occupancy by their ‘owners’[4], which in the meantime have moved back to more central areas because of the general impossibility of finding a job in Borei Santepheap Pi and its surroundings, and the inconvenience of commuting daily to the city centre. Some of the ‘returners’ sublet their units, while others sell them informally and below a reasonable market price, because of the urgency to move back toward the centre. On the Northern-West tip lies a garment factory owned by the company itself[5], providing employment, although in precarious conditions.

### **Oudong Moi (Tang Khiev)**

Oudong Moi<sup>[6]</sup> is a much smaller relocation site rising 55km North of Phnom Penh (about 70km from Borei Santepheap Pi). Here the setting is a rural one, with naked and often muddy roads



distributing to a number of two-storey houses (again looking all alike) and a couple of bigger buildings. The 'grey' of Borei Santepheap Pi's asphalt and concrete squares is here replaced by the brown and green of nature. After the transfer of 510 families from Borei Santepheap Pi to Oudong Moi was completed, a volunteer from an NGO of Christian inspiration (Manna4Life) began to help the population, raising funds for the purchase of blue tarpaulins to protect families during rainy season. Although the tarps were sold soon by the population to make some money, they eventually gave the name to the site, from those days known as Tang Khiev, precisely 'blue tents'. The volunteer kept working for long with the community, obtaining many results after almost five years. Saving groups have started, and through these funds all houses have been totally self-built by the community, using a simple design that rejects the 'expensive' models proposed by other NGOs and that well interprets, through a wooden structure, the traditional rural family house in Cambodia, elevated from the ground to protect from floods, and making use of the covered space on the ground floor for activities such as cooking, eating, resting, working or simply as a deposit for what does not find space upstairs.

Although most of the original 510 families have now left the site, 104 families have stayed; the community has kept thriving, and recently has built a school and a centre for the promotion of agriculture.

## Conclusions

Much has been written on Phnom Penh's evictions and relocation sites: articles and reports have cleverly focused mostly on the logics of spatial segregation and exclusion intrinsic in the dynamics of forced displacement, and on the constant and harsh violation of housing and human rights perpetrated against the evicted populations, on the disruption of their livelihoods and so on. Here though, we have briefly illustrated two different sets of discourses, one coming from a powerful

developer, the other one from a religious NGO, which have produced different though comparable outcomes.

In both cases, the ideal behind the 'design' of the relocation site has been one of working toward the creation of new 'polities'. These include self-sufficiency within the sites' boundaries, with attempts to start education and savings programmes and create sources of income, with self-built housing (or self-expanded housing in the case of Borei Santepheap Pi), gathering around a few public spaces hosting the programmes for collective activities. The 'ingredients' used by two completely different actors have not been so different, although this must obviously be read as a provocation. In fact, while on one site we have a big developer strictly involved in the government of the city and its transformation, on the other site we have found an NGO that is trying to work in the cracks left by the failure of the governmental plans carried out by authorities and the private sector.

The current evidence suggests that in the coming years it is likely that most of the relocation sites will configure as big peripheral holes: giant planning and urban design failures where populations will strive to survive or decide to abandon, searching for more secure livelihoods closer to the centre. The example of Tang Khiev in Oudong tell us that a new urbanity is being born in Phnom Penh's outskirts. Possibly another one will be born soon in Borei Santepheap Pi and in other relocation sites too, but this can happen only on the condition of inventing practices that could contest the current mode of urban development, and enable old and new urbanites to re-appropriate the act of designing, producing and governing their spaces.

*All images kindly provided by Camillo Boano and credited to UCL's MSc Building and Urban Design in Development.*

## **Notes**

[1]The use of cross-subsidies from commercial development had already been used by Phan Imex Company in Borei Keila.

[2]This absence is significant considering Borei Santepheap Pi has been developed by a private company: in Cambodia most of such private developments have almost monumental entrances, sometimes remarked by an arch.

[3]7NG Group Co. Ltd. (2010). *Loan for Housing and Company Vision for Urban Development*. Phnom Penh: 7NG. Retrieved from

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[4] 'Owner' is not the correct term since land title will (or might) be issued only after 5 years of stable occupations.

[5] Although it now appears as property of the garment industry company 'The Willbes Cambodia & Co. Ltd.' – as stated in the entrance gate. This research has not been able to verify possible linkages of this company with 7NG.

[6] The translation simply reads as 'Oudong One': three more relocation sites have been built in its close surroundings in the following years STT. (2012). *Losing the Plot: Rapid Assessment of Household Debt in Trapeang Anhchanh*. (N. Lindstrom, Ed.). Phnom Penh: STT. Retrieved from [http://teangtnaut.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Losing-the-Plot\\_STT-2012\\_FINAL.pdf](http://teangtnaut.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Losing-the-Plot_STT-2012_FINAL.pdf)

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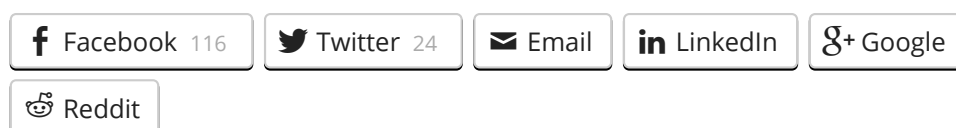
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