

The Politics of the Possible: Making urban life in Phnom Penh

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Although diminished, cities remain critical domains for engendering new collectivities which, in turn, continuously remake the potentialities of life. Even as the purveyors and recipients of various forms of development assistance attempt to sort through ideological baggage to enroll something usefully instrumental to their diverse aspirations and projects, most forms of development assistance prove limiting. This is often simply at the level of failing to understand and value what most urban residents in cities of the South are actually doing. Instead of helping activate an urban politics of sustained contestations aimed at producing space and support for a heterogeneity of actors and practices to thrive in the city, prevailing notions of inclusion, capacity building, and sustainability either intentionally or inadvertently close down spaces of operation. The aim of this article is to provide a detailed examination of some of the dimensions of the work which development assistance fails to engage.

Shifting terrains for the productivity of urban life

Policies and interventions undertaken to substantiate the presence of low-income urban actors within the more central domains of the city have increasingly emphasized their right to the city. In other words, a legally enshrined mechanism that ensures the ongoing presence of all who reside in cities to "make" an urban life that "counts." This presence is to be guaranteed regardless of the logics and trajectories with which the city is changing and to which the poor are largely viewed as making minimal contributions. The activation of this right then often requires the sustainable implantation of low-income actors against the grain of inflated land values, transformations of land use, or the locational shifts of employment and production. Various formulas are used in order to make these countervailing efforts viable—from the subsidization of land purchase or long-term leasing arrangements, land sharing, which attempts to forge a compromise between generating maximal profit on valuable land and minimizing the political costs of displacing long-term residents, land swaps to the dispersal of large low-income communities in a proliferation of small clusters throughout the city (Evans, 2001; Pizzaro et al, 2003; Satttherwaite, 2002; United Nations Program on Human Settlements, 2003).

Regardless of whether or how various manifestations of these formulas are applied to specific urban contexts, their underlying assumption is that low income residents lack the capacity to give shape to the urban system in ways that work beyond an efficacy related to their own limited survival needs (Cheng and Gereffi, 1994; Meagher, 1995, 2003; Carr and Chen, 2002; Roy, 2004). While the prevalent thinking has long held that the availing of property rights and security of tenure constitutes the necessary basis for the accumulation of resources needed to make urban life viable for the low-income residents, little has been explored about how the relationships of urban localities predominantly characterized as those of the poor with the city over varying durations of time are substantially

constitutive of the city itself (Goldman and Weitzman, 1997; Robinson, 2002; Chatterjee, 2002; King 2003; Smith, 2005).

While it may be true that most instances of self-provisioning of essential urban services and the wide range of actions undertaken to compensate for limited income generating opportunities and the resultant implications for social life are both cost ineffective and labor intensive, what is often obscured are the continuous reshaping of many low-income localities and their particular capacities for driving and adapting to new modalities of urban existence (Bayat, 1998; Benjamin, 2000; Koolhaas, 2001; Bakker, 2003; Chakravorty, 2003). The compositions, histories, spatial characteristics, economic complexion, and political contingencies of low-income communities in the Global South are inundated with their own particularities, sensibilities, and potentials. Yet, they often exude a dynamism that reflects a mostly implicit collective efficacy to sustain the affective vitality from which cities must continuously draw in order to productively make use of the natural, technical, productive, and symbolic resources it has available to it. In other words, cities must continuously rework how people, things, infrastructures, languages, and images are to be intersected and pieced together—efforts that self-conscious planning may provide representations of but which are generated by maximizing the vast potentials within the city itself for relations among all kinds of things for which there exist no prior maps, inclinations, or even apparent possibilities (Law 2002; Jiménez, 2003; Ferrándiz 2004; Narula 2004).

The key point here is that even when most of the interventions aimed at securing a long-term presence of low income households in particular sites and under specific financing arrangements did not turn out as planned, the subsequent diversification of these sites and the social and financial arrangements between increasingly heterogeneous residents and activities have produced localities potentially capable of making viable uses of an increasingly service rather than industrial urban economy. These abilities may also potentially substantiate the capacity of cities—whose relationships with each other are characterized by competitions over inward investments, a rush to the “bottom” in terms of availing low cost labor, tax relief, capital repatriation and exit opportunities—to maximize the resourcefulness of its internal elements, as well as taking advantage of the variety of transurban commercial activities that are not directly engineered by multinational corporate capital (Robinson, 2002; Sellers, 2002; Wee and Jayasuriya, 2002).

Bassac: Divergent localities and the remaking of Phnom Penh

In this article I want to explore these points in the context of one low-income locality in Phnom Penh. This is a city particularly adept to this exercise as it combines a long-term memory of urban existence with a recent history whereby the city had to be remade from scratch following the almost total evacuation of residents from the city during the Khmer Rouge regime, 1975-1979. Thus the city “re-enters” urban history just before the advent of structural adjustment, trade liberalization, and governance restructuring in the early 1980’s, which has had significant impact on the economic and spatial foundations of urban life across the South. Phnom Penh had to rapidly accommodate a population that was in essence a residue of its former self. Much of the urbanized population was killed during the forced relocation and many of those who came to the city in 1979 had no experience of it and were there because there was simply no where else safe or viable to go. Additionally, much of the archive and cadastral that had registered what belonged to whom was destroyed, and even if it had existed there was no ready legal or administrative mechanisms to enforce particular instantiations of settlement. Even now, twenty-seven years later, the majority of urban residents remain formally

“squatters” since only highly limited mechanisms exist to formally alienate land and establish full property rights.

Given the complications of administering a population that basically settled where they could and had highly limited opportunities to produce livelihood in a city with a dearth of both formal and informal institutions, an implicit militarization of control during the initial post-Khmer Rouge years enforced tight rules for the distribution of food, for where residents could go, and what activities they could engage in. This strict regimen had to be applied, however, to a social field whereby highly disparate backgrounds, forced into some equanimity by the political disaster that they had shared in common, lived in close proximity to each other and had to continuously improvise basic tasks of collaboration (Gottesman, 2003). With infrastructure that had stood vacant for several years, the provision of sanitation, water, and power initially had to be continuously reworked piece by piece. Eventually, the economic capacities of the Cambodian Chinese, with their connections across the regional diaspora and the military proficiency of the largely Vietnamese administrators during the first 13 years, with accompanying connections to Saigon, quickly restored Phnom Penh to a basic level of functioning.

Presently the city is experiencing enormous change. A limited banking system that results in savings placed in land acquisition, combined with excess liquidity derived from a substantial illicit trade economy supported by the ruling regime, the rush of speculative investment from Korea, China, Singapore, and Malaysia, in particular, to ensure strategic emplacement in the city, and the easy circumvention of existing land regulation systems has resulted in highly inflated land valuation. Land increases in price 30-50% annually. New developments consisting primarily of multiple long rows of 3-4 story shop-houses (Pteah Lveng) have appeared across the city—with names such as ChinaTown, Happy Valley, and World City.

As a result, well established low-income localities are rapidly being removed from the center and resettled some thirty kilometers away from the center, often on sites with limited infrastructure. Although forced evictions in face of land deals have been taking place for the last ten years, the extensiveness and speed of these removals has reach crisis proportions in the eyes of ordinary residents, with nearly daily articles in the press and the preoccupations of everyday conversation.

The locality which is the focus of examination here, Bassac, is located on some of the highest valued real estate in Southeast Asia. The low-income population of this area had been distributed over three contiguous and varying formations—Bouding, Krey Dahan, and Sambok Chap. The Bouding, or the “White Building” accommodates some 350 households in a four story construction that runs 325 meters in an uninterrupted linear pattern. Dey Krahan is a settlement of 1, 465 households built immediately to the east of Bouding on 4.7 hectares of public land. Here the original residents of the settlement were issued “family books” registering and giving families the right of occupancy to the land and ownership of the edifice constructed on the land, as well as the right to compensation if the state changed the status of the land. Sambok Chap, further to the east along the Tonle Bassac riverfront was an informal settlement of 2, 890 households, with only a 50 households in an area called Group 45 possessing any formally acknowledged legal rights to occupancy. The state has cleared out this settlement several times under the auspices of municipal beautification and redevelopment schemes. Two major fires, likely cases of arson, have forced resettlement to peripheral areas in the past, with large proportions of the original population returning to the area with new squatters. The land was subsequently sold to a private developer and the residents forcefully removed in mid-2006.

These three sub-localities are set within an area characterized by land speculation and redevelopment over the past half-century—a process that has accelerated intensely during the past five years. Originally, the Bouding was a state sponsored imitation of a large development known as the “Grey Building” or front du Bassac, designed by the country’s most celebrated architect, Vann Molyvann, during the period of Sihanouk regime that emphasized a comprehensive modernization of the city. Built in 1962, it was originally intended to house athletes for the Southeast Asia games, and then provided affordable housing for primarily civil servants. Indeed, the Grey Building, with its undulations of scale (a variable vertical distribution of floors), separations of kitchen and living area in traditional Khmer style, and living spaces raised over a vacant ground level and spaced along a series of stairwells to facilitate ventilation was a play on Le Corbusier’s formulations of the linear city, surrounded by the contrasts of green open space and architectural homogeneity cultivating a form of equanimity and civic identity (Molyvann, 2003; Mingui, 2003). This construction was seen as an embodiment of the effort to concentrate the development of the city in a line running north-south along the river, as opposed to successively concentric circles, and the socialization of a modern urban population situated between and having equivalent access to water and open space as a foundation for responsible urban living.

In 1992, the “grey building” was sold to developers who turned it into one of the largest office blocks in the city, including the housing of two private universities. The Bouding has been substantially reworked by its residents over the past twenty-five years, as the lower ground portions have been turned into shops, markets, and popular cafes, and the stairwells into thickly gathered public spaces. As the area had housed the now burned-out national theater, at least one-third of the residents had once worked in some capacity with the performing arts. In fact the Bouding has been popularly segmented into three sections corresponding to the three major stairwells—the police section at the southern front, which originally had housed police, most of whom have sold off their apartments and moved to other areas of the city; the artists section, which is still occupied by cultural workers who have highly divergent relationships to art work and practice and; the sex workers section, reflecting the inundation of sex workers in 1986 and the elaboration of a large sex economy in the area. In the early 1990’s households who had been wedged in the small areas remaining in Khmer Rouge control between the Thai border and the rest of Cambodia were interspersed across the building. Throughout the city, the Bouding has a problematic reputation, embodying simultaneously the notions of the failed project of “modernist living”, the dangerous densities and contiguities of sex, art, crime, popular culture, and informal commerce—as the area is known as the place where one can acquire nearly anything.

While the traditional commercial areas of the central city—organized around its primary markets and historic Chinatown—contain high population densities in multistory structures, they are organized as a district, with formal businesses, hotels, and restaurants. Bouding stands out as some inexplicable island of provisionality—full of small markets, stalls, cafes, gaming parlors, computer rooms, improvised classrooms, storage places—seemingly unlinked to any part of the city, and an anomaly to the buildings and functions which surround it. In addition to the office complex of the former “Grey Building”, there is the new national parliament, a mega, still half-completed Malaysian casino, the Naga, a new ministry building for intergovernmental affairs, the large grounds of a long-standing Russian embassy, and a nearly completed shop-house complex that runs in parallel nearly the length of the Bouding. To the west is a well-established middle class residential area. In other words, the development trajectory pursued by discrete yet interlinked projects encircling Bouding seems to act to choke it off and constitute its ongoing existence only as an anomaly.

This is especially the case given that the land of the contiguous settlement, Dey Krahan has already been sold to private developers. Although the provisional resettlement plans are yet to be finalized, a coalition of community leaders was accorded the opportunity by the state to enter into negotiations with five distinct private developers and to choose an arrangement that best suited their interests. This coalition has been working with the 7NG Company to work out relocation to a site just beyond the airport, and the company has provided a pilot construction (houses and roads) plus promises of facilitating employment in the area as a strong incentive. It is likely that the resettlement will take place, but there remains strong opposition in Dey Krahan, and it is not clear exactly what such opposition could mean in terms of the area's duration.

Social complexion and space

The Land Law of August 2001 stipulates that if a household has been living in a property for five years prior to the date of the law's implementation and had secured it in a "peaceful" manner, that they were eligible to attain title for that property. Although the government has consented to a process of systematic land registration, little of this has occurred in urban areas. In abeyance of a systematic urban titling process, owners can attain what is called sporadic title within a three month period but at a cost which is prohibitive for all but the well-off. As such, this disjunction between what the law permits and what the implementing apparatus is able to do creates ambiguity in terms of rights and disposition.

Further complicating land disposition is the bifurcated distinctions in state held property—i.e. state public land and state private land. Article 15 of the most recent land legislation stipulates that public land for the general use—such as airports, roads, parks, stations, territories of natural origin (e.g. rivers), archeological and religious sites—cannot be sold. Land that does not fall into such categories is considered as state private land and can be sold. As the state retains the right to determine when a property loses its public interest, public land can be reclassified (Khemro and Payne, 2004). Whereas a cadastral exists concerning state private land, there has yet to be a systematic mapping of state public land. The prime minister issued a sub-decree in 2003 prohibiting further sale of state land. Still prohibitions against alienation can be circumvented through land leasing arrangements, from indefinite leases not covered by law to definitive leasing systems whose duration, up to a maximum of fifteen years, is contingent upon a contribution to be made in the public interest. Although leasing systems are only to be applied to areas less than 10,000 hectares, this stipulation is seldom adhered to.

Additional complexities are added by virtue of a woefully underdeveloped taxation system. Whereas agricultural land can be taxed at a rate from 2-3% of the value of the land annually, the application of taxation on vacant land or land without commercial purposes is very much on an ad hoc basis. The state appears to be waiving taxation on as much land as possible. The only discernible controls are in the collection of a flat tax of 4% on all purchased land since a receipt is required for its registration.

An ambiguous legal context coupled with land speculation directly supported at the highest level of the regime has led to the now familiar anticipation that the Bouding's days are numbered. Still the diverse backgrounds, aspirations, and economic capacities of its residents preclude any easy resolution of sporadic negotiations with municipal and national authorities undertaken to explore various resettlement schemes. This diversity also provides sufficient "corridors" of connectivity to the rest of the city so that the use of development to create a kind of structural claustrophobia can be practically countered. Of course there is widespread ambivalence on the part of residents as to the wisdom of remaining even if some breathing space seems to be constantly "pulled out of the hat." The substantial

changes in the built environment across the city produce new imaginaries as to what constitutes the signs of really belonging to the city, of what it means to be a “normal” resident. In the warren of staircases, narrow halls, small apartments, and densely scattered commercial spaces, all tightly packed against each other, the management of everyday transactions and security is labor intensive. There are barely any formal agencies or associations that lend some predictability or order, although disparate agendas and inclinations do manage to interlock through the need and ability of residents to often have a view of what each other is doing and to render this a matter of conversation, both serious and playful.

The scores of small cafes that have been inserted in the ground floor openings that had been initially built for flood control and ventilation are one example of the many local domains for everyday management and the circulation of information. In those mostly frequented by youth, the social scene is almost always heterogeneous in terms of who is sitting and talking together. Even though youth in the locality engage in clear demarcations of self-identity, through the use of various tattoos, clothing and hair styles and ways of speaking, the cafes are not appropriated as the territory of a particular group but rather for a kind of mutual witnessing and exchange. Youth who are able to attend university or some of the scores of tertiary level training programs across the city must frequently mask where they come from in order not to be shunned, and therefore have access to information and points of view that the *chukan* (gangsters), who strongly assert their residential location, do not have.

In the cafes then there is a great deal of emphasis on an exchange of different interpretations of the rest of the city made possible by these divergent trajectories of engagement. For the *chukan* do not sit still within the Bouding but also attempt to figure out ways to move across the city, through a field of antagonisms and alliances with other gangs, or by doing the dirty work for, most often, Vietnamese syndicates. This exposure generates stories and information that the university students then use as a resource in their zones of operation to convey a street wisdom that many of their fellow students would not possess. At a more concrete level, the cafes and youth become contexts for the advertisement and acquisition of goods and services acquired through theft, bartering, or as the by-product of favors rendered to *okhna* (“big men”). For both poor and middle class residents, who struggle to maintain specific levels of consumption, access to such low-cost goods are critical.

Across the area, the profusion of talk, information exchange, rumor and transactions also take place in the billiards and snooker sheds and card games across the neighborhood. Both Bouding and Dey Krahan are characterized by multiple comings and goings. Roughly 40% of the residents of both areas have never lived anywhere else in the city—primarily because for most residents of the city, once they found a place to live it was crucial to hang on to it at all costs, given the limited number of land transactions for all but the well to do. Given this, the social economy of the area continues to find an anchor centered on the identities of the performing arts and sex work, and the network configurations particular to each. Household compositions, spatial and financial arrangements, gender economies, and problem-solving in the section dominated by sex workers and their associates and those in the contiguous section still dominated by performing artists are markedly different, even if each is looked upon by the wider society with suspicion. Even as this divergence provides distinct zones of anchorage, the proximity of these different sections enables them to provide a range of opportunities and supports to each other.

Because the reputation of the building being a center of artists is well known, customers of the sex workers will frequently inquire about musicians and performers who might be contacted in order to play at weddings and other celebrations—contexts on which the artists depend heavily as an important source of income. The artists have organized daily workshops in dance, music, and theater—primarily

as a way of imparting the knowledge of several senior artists who live in the building to a younger generation. These classes are also made available to some of the younger sex workers since the acquisition of these skills can probably take them off the street and into higher class karaoke and entertainment complexes where they can earn more money.

The other key social constellation in the building is a group of *Neak Roap robos*—women who acquire essential household items, such as MSG, rice, soap powder, in bulk, and who then provide large supplies of these items to households in advance on credit. Such provisioning works out cheaper than the usual practice where low income households buy small packages of such items on a daily basis. Again, each of these anchoring social constellations has its own practices of self-maintenance—its obligations and reciprocities. As these constellations not only have their own varied interactions with each other but with many different other kinds of residents, there needs to be contexts where residents would not attempt to define the interactions on their own terms. In other words, the sustenance of each of three major “social groups”—each with a long-term but not necessarily stable coherence—within a complex neighborhood of relations can neither be based on cutting themselves off from each other as a defensive maneuver nor can they simply count on a sense of mutuality within their primary reference group without spending a great deal of time and energy making these bonds concretely meaningful. The cafes, pool halls, cards games and gambling dens then become places of limited equanimity, where regardless of the person’s standing or affiliations, the process of playing the game is itself a bet on the possibility of an exchange of information and points of view.

Additionally, these transactions become a means of fine tuning the frequently jumbled insertion of various activities within the crowded spaces of the area. Sugar cane vendor stalls are inserted into someone’s front entrance, coconut sellers set up their wares on the rails of a staircase, children play the *shu* game in front of a woman selling cooked porridge, a mobile phone card vendor sets up in the front corner of an outdoor café. In an area where both public and commercial space often become indistinguishable and where rights of access and belonging are attributed to histories of residence and past use, the ability of many individuals to make a livelihood depends upon delicate negotiations with others. Sometimes these negotiations require cash payment for a particular use of space, such as when an “owner” has been able to secure a strong claim for their rights to a space; at other times, different exchanges are made—of favors and services. Sometimes a “proprietor” will allow occupancy as a way simply to make sure the space is used—either to ward off the possibility of competing claims or as an act of generosity.

Since many residents in the area participate in the same economic activities—hawking the same goods, cooking the same food, or selling the same phone cards, the competition amongst them must be careful not to drive others to the “bottom”—diminishing already very small profit margins or destabilizing limited markets. Limits must be placed on any questioning around why certain residents are only buying, for example, phone cards from one vendor and not others. The casual and wide ranging exchanges in the gaming places permit talk about the different tastes and inclinations of different residents, in turn generating stories about the varied consumer base of the area. These stories enable different entrepreneurs not only to introduce slight variations in the way they sell their goods, given that the pricing structures for almost all commodities remain basically the same, but also constitute plausible explanations about why they attract certain customers and not others.

Even at these minimal levels, the heterogeneity of the building produces an environment particularly suited to an overall service oriented economy. The area is far from the industrial belts at the edges of the city and somewhat removed from the main commercial centers. Thus, residents must forge a social

economy based on the interaction between basic levels of self-provisioning, the incursion of the outside in the form of workers at nearby state ministries, universities, and office buildings looking for cheap items and services, nocturnal clients looking for sex, and the cultivation of work opportunities for performing artists. The negotiations, trade-offs, and incessant recalibrations of actions and sentiments that continuously take place are occasioned by the residual history of the area itself—with its conjunction of “failed” and “new” projects and the particular characteristics of the built environment (the particular physical character of the Bouding itself). Additionally, the shaping and efficacy of these negotiations are permitted by the particular complexion of the area in ways that make the Bouding productive and an important aspect of the overall urban landscape. This is far from the notion of *anotobei* (anarchy) with which the Bouding is popularly associated.

Comparative speculations

While land speculation and urban redevelopment has been a predominate feature of urban life nearly everywhere, its intensification in Phnom Penh has been particularly strong at present. At the beginning of 2006, the boundaries of the municipality were changed so as to double the city’s physical size. While this doubling was an important feature of the completion of a strategic development plan for a city that had basically run out of land, this alteration was undertaken largely as a bet related to apparently disparate objectives. These included the need to officially maintain the impression that resettled people were not being excluded from the city, the need to rationalize fragmented infrastructural grids and planning frameworks, and the “unofficial need” to inflate the value of land holdings acquired by the elite at the periphery. Given the fact that the municipality only has authority over land transactions of less than 2,000 hectares, it is unclear as to what this expansion will do.

The point of this discussion, however, is the pervasiveness of speculation as an urban practice engaged in by all kinds of urban actors. This is certainly the case for residents of the Bassac to whom speculative activity is a crucial feature of everyday socioeconomic life. Much of the present difficulty involved in sorting out a viable solution for the resettlement or remaking of Dey Krahan involves the extent to which the complexity of its local politics is largely based on past speculative activity. Theoretically, as localities were settled, family books were issued to one household for one residential property. The divergent economic fortunes of different households could lead some to incur large debts which they paid off by selling their rights of occupancy to neighbors, who in the process acquired the family book for that property, while renting out it to the original occupants. Alterations in family names are easily done since the entire process remains an extralegal process (Fallavier, 1999).

When a locality like Dey Krahan is to be resettled, a list is compiled indicating the names of the original residents—those with family books—who are accorded the rights to either monetary compensation for the property or access to property in the new settlement. The willingness of certain households to aggressively lend money to their poorer neighbors in anticipation of their inability to repay has been a calculated maneuver to acquire multiple properties in new settlements which can then be sold for a profit unattainable if they were to dispose of the property in the original settlement. At times, family books will be sold back to the original inhabitants shortly before the anticipated time for resettlement at the expectant value of the new property, with money often loaned by the seller themselves. For recent arrivals who have no possibility of being added to the list for either compensation or resettlement, as they do not possess a family book, older households will sometimes acquire the property of those who, due to varying circumstances, will not move and/or are not eligible for compensation and then agree to rent out the newly acquired property to them for a so-called “finder’s fee.” This fee usually consists of a portion of the present proceeds of whatever commercial

activity they are involved in. All of these transactions of course affect the political sentiments distinguishing those who actively seek engagements with developers and those who do not.

Similarly, households of more recent origin will pay outright for the family book of households who have resided in an area for longer periods of time or acquire such documentation in return for taking one or more members of a household into long term employment. As access to public civil service jobs usually require an unofficial minimal payment of between USD 1,000-2,000, property rights in low-income communities are sometimes either traded outright in lieu of cash payments for such jobs, or offered for a time-limited period, from 2-3 years, in the event that relocation occurs during that time. While security of shelter may indeed be the predominate concern on the part of most urban residents, in Bassac, this security is often traded for various durations of cash payments, for long-term employment, or even various short-term gains. These divergent strategic formulations constitute localities then which calculate their prospects in different ways, often creating political tensions, themselves objects of speculation, when areas face major transitions.

Perhaps the most critical form of speculation centers on individual livelihood. In Bassac, most formal employment is situated in low wage service positions—e.g. street sweepers for Cimitri, the company to which the management of public sanitation is subcontracted, low-end service workers, such as cleaners, tea-makers, and storeroom clerks for hospitals, agencies, ministries, companies, and restaurants, gardeners and housekeepers. Each job may have incremental salary increases, but there are usually limited opportunities for advancement and increases will be capped at a ceiling that may only double wages after ten years of service. There is a great deal of lateral movement across these positions, not necessarily because the wage level improves but because the different situation may bring new relations, information, prospects for new patrons, new borrowing opportunities, and new opportunities for housing and the acquisition of basic items. Work is viewed not only as the performance of a particular task in relationship to a particular institution and set of procedures, but as being embedded in a larger field of interactions which may be cultivated opportunistically for the mobilization of resources and opportunities that have no direct connection to the job itself. Such formal employment is viewed not so much in terms of a provisionally secure wage—although this remains critical for household economies—but as a platform on which new positions with the larger social fields of the city could be constructed.

Of course there are no guarantees that any instance of such lateral movement across jobs will accomplish any advancement, as frequently such workers in Bassac report finding themselves in more limiting situations, with more demanding bosses and unsympathetic co-workers. Often the conditions on which assessments are made rapidly change as workers and supervisors come and go, and the economic fortunes of a given enterprise fluctuate. As so many workers attempt to reposition themselves, speculating on better livelihoods, the overall game comes to lack a certain stability necessary for the relationships of confidence building and collaboration to evolve over time, resulting in both a dependence and skill in operating through more provisional partnerships among people aimed toward short-term opportunistic gains—i.e., the ability to quickly intervene into a situation with often drastic maneuvers. Thus, even though some individuals come to quickly change their lives and situations, the risks incumbent in such livelihood strategies also increase. The piecing together of sketchy “partnerships” among disparate co-workers and affiliates in their varied networks have often resulted, for example in individual participants being able to attain new living quarters by pooling together funds to purchase the family book of an old multi-dwelling building or to become co-owners of new restaurants, where before they were cleaners in others. Yet, there are as many stories about

individuals absconding with funds, of being duped with false documents, or promised deliveries that never materialize.

Regardless of widespread popular knowledge about the risks entailed in lateral movements across jobs and the intensities in which individuals engage work as a locus of opportunistic actions, most residents canvassed about these issues in Bassac feel that they simply can't stay put. Whereas stability and security are valued, especially in light of the precarity that has been so much at the heart of Phnom Penh's history over recent decades, there is also a sense that an ingrained uncertainty about what could happen in the city necessitates individuals taking an active distance from any confidence in stability, and that stability itself is a matter of speculation. For example, residents of Ros Reay, a highly dense low-income area of 1,000 households wedged in between the rear of the French embassy and the Bong Koek Lake, undertook a major self-implemented upgrading project, with 339 meters of concrete road and land paving, sewage and storm drains, tree planting, fence repair and house painting. All of this was done knowing that the surrounding area was considered highly valuable land, and that developers had already begun to fill in substantial portions of the lake, seriously comprising the overall drainage system for the city. Additionally, although a provisional system of community titling had been worked out with the municipality, there were no legally enforceable guarantees for even the short term survival of the community. This upgrading then was, again, a kind of bet, that this upgrading would make Ros Reay more secure.

Re-articulating the city

In such a context where people do rely upon relationships of trust and confidence, yet also conclude that they are insufficient for enabling a viable urban life, how does one then assess the institutional and policy directions that could be taken to improve the chances of low-income urban residents? With this question in mind then—of how to live through incessant insufficiency—that assessment of what constitutes adequate housing, appropriate social densities, effective governance, and appropriately delineated work and economic sectorization can simultaneously take many different directions. This is consideration that goes beyond any claims for the efficacy of informal economies and instead deals with the shape of situations—of living space, everyday transaction, public life, and work—that facilitate, even at difficult and uncertain costs, the capacities of diverse urban residents to continuously make and adapt to conditions that keep the vast heterogeneities of urban life—its things, resources, spaces, infrastructures, and peoples—in multiple intersections with each other as the very basis for an urban “economy” (Amin, 2002; Benjamin, 2004).

In Phnom Penh, the everyday speculations of ordinary residents, while further introducing uncertainty to the city, at least ensure a certain circulation of knowledge and familiarity which, while not often or even usually dependable as a stable platform on which to elaborate long-term social cooperation, recreates variable openings in the urban fabric that potentially allow unmediated connections among different facets of urban life and thus renews spaces where many different kinds of actors can be included. The so-called “inclusive city” is less a matter of policy and intentional integration, then it is a by-product of residents having access to diverse spaces of operation through which they can come in contact with each other and do something with that contact other than participating in shared consumption. What makes the social economies of Bassac so important, even under siege, is their exemplification of how the ambivalence of urban life can be managed.

Urban residency is thus valued for its potentials for deploying a politics whereby residents attempt to put together various constellations through which they can hedge their bets, pursue disparate, even

contradictory aspirations, and general multiple domains through which to recognize themselves and support these multiple recognitions. The city is way of keeping things open and of concretizing ways of becoming something that has not existed before, but which has been possible all along.

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