

William Chapman with Jennifer Malin

University of Hawai'i Summer Program in Architectural Recording

Cambodia is a country still emerging from nearly 20 years of civil war, invasion, and political turmoil. Its professional class, including architects, archeologists, and historians, were nearly all lost during that tumultuous period. Returning some level of technical competence, especially in the area of historic preservation and documentation techniques for historic buildings, has been one of the priorities for the University of Hawai'i's multi-faceted cooperative training program.

In 1996, the University's first architectural recording field school—following two years of successful archeological field schools (see *CRM* Volume 19, Number 3, 1996)—was held in the historic capital city of Phnom Penh—a city of approximately one million people located in the south central part of Cambodia. Headed by University of Hawai'i faculty members William Chapman and Spencer Leineweber, the 1996 program provided instruction for 16 Cambodian and 9 American students in architecture, planning, Southeast Asian Studies, and historic preservation. Funded by a generous award from the Asia Cultural Council and the U.S. Information Service, the program was carried out in cooperation with the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh and had the cooperation of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism and the Ministry of Culture of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

Students taking measurements in the field in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photo by William Chapman.

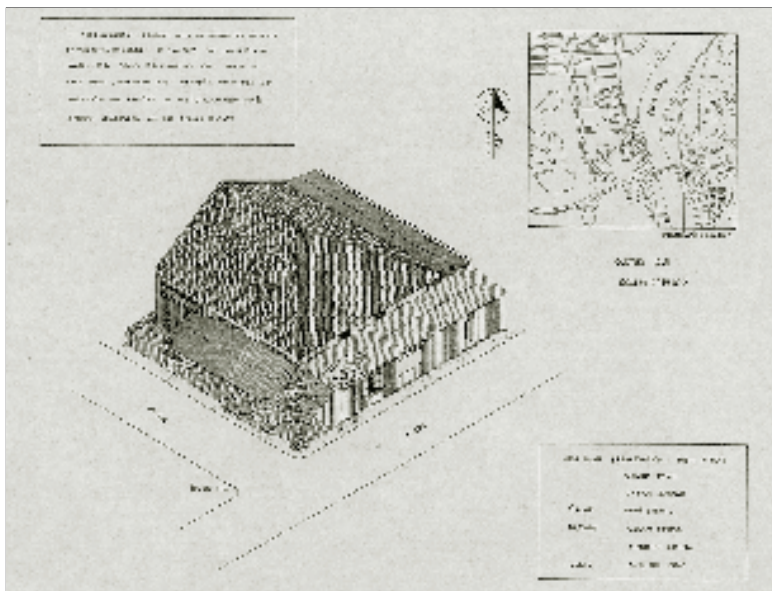
Axonometric drawing of shophouses, Chbar Ampau, Cambodia.

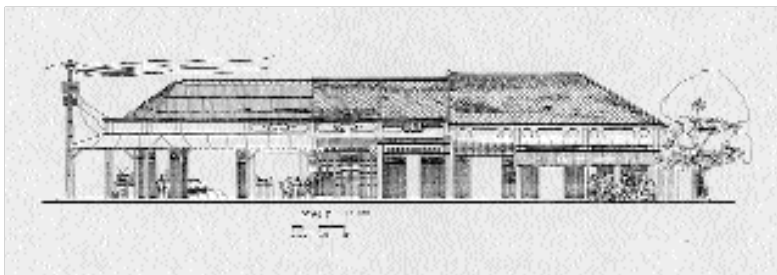
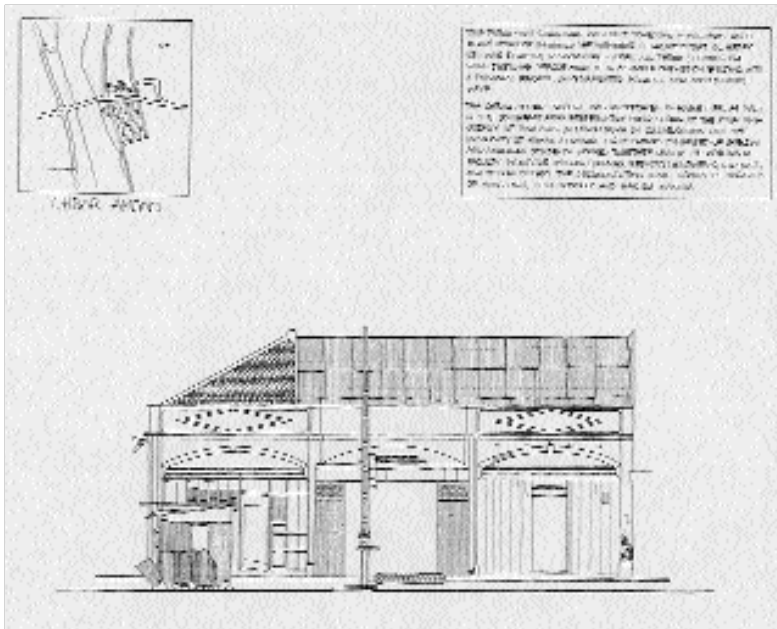


The 1996 summer field school was intended to fill a significant gap in the present curriculum of the Royal University. Founded in 1965, essentially as an outgrowth of the earlier École des Beaux Arts, the University of Fine Arts provides instruction in architecture, planning, painting, sculpture, dance, music, and archeology. Instruction in architecture has only recently been reinstated—the first class graduated in 1995—and at this point covers only basic aspects of the field.

Historic preservation does not figure at all in the present curriculum. There is little formal instruction in architectural history or urban design—all subjects covered by the field school. Most significantly, there has been no instruction in or regular program in architectural recording—a subject generally considered as the foundation for other historic preservation-related work. The summer field school, therefore, helped to fill this void. Students were given lectures and “hands-on” instruction in an increasingly significant aspect of architectural practice. They learned to appreciate and make accurate records of historic buildings and learned also to appreciate this patrimony.

The program focussed on the traditional and historic architecture of Phnom Penh and Southeast Asia generally. Students were introduced to basic methods used in the survey and documentation of historic architecture and to basic principles of new design in historic contexts. The program included instruction in mapping, architectural terminology, photography, measured drawing techniques, and drafting. Professor Leineweber conducted a special week-long exercise on urban design in historic contexts. The American students also participated in a preliminary tour conducted by Professor Chapman in Thailand, visiting historic sites in Bangkok and making a day-long excursion to the ancient city of Ayutthaya. They also had an opportunity to travel to the historic site of Angkor in northern Cambodia as a final excursion.





Measured drawings: Student-drawn elevation of shophouses in Chbar Ampau, Cambodia.

Probably the strongest feature of the program was the day-to-day interaction of Cambodian and American students. This was an explicit aim of the project, with the hope being to break down barriers between participants from various backgrounds. In the past, instruction at the University of Fine Arts has been very much “top-down” in character. This has consisted mostly of visiting outside instructors who are able only to give occasional formal lectures.

The 1996 field school differed significantly from past experience in instruction at the University of Fine Arts. Students worked together on teams usually consisting of two Cambodians and one American each. American and Cambodian students also interacted informally at many levels. Students went on excursions together, shared meals, and visited one another frequently. Cambodian students also invited Americans to their homes, introduced them to Cambodian foods, and taught them some Cambodian language.

American students, for their part, helped instill in their Cambodian counterparts a greater appreciation for their country and their cultural patrimony. Up to now, most of the instruction in architectural history at the University of Fine Arts has focused on the ancient Khmer legacy. This is certainly a profoundly significant heritage, and

there is much more research required in the area of Khmer civilization, including ancient Khmer architecture. However, much else of value has tended to be overlooked. This has been especially true of colonial architecture, including many architecturally-significant buildings designed during the period of the French Protectorate (from 1863 to 1953) as well as many lesser buildings also constructed during this period.

Most significant among this “lesser” architecture are the virtually thousands of shophouses built in Phnom Penh between approximately 1890 and 1950. Comprised of shop fronts on the ground floor and either interior loft spaces or additional stories above living units, this building type served as the basic building block of Phnom Penh—as well as of many other cities in Cambodia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Resided in by Khmer peoples as well as Chinese, Cham, Vietnamese, and other ethnic minorities, shop houses were—and are—central to the urban life of Phnom Penh.

In addition to the shophouses, the field school focused attention on traditional wood-frame houses, the typical urban residences of middle-class Khmer in the city until recently. Increasingly recognized as a significant aspect of Cambodian patrimony, this architecture, nonetheless, remains largely undocumented. Again, the field school set out to fill this gap in a small way.

The project area for the 1996 field school was an approximately 16-block concentration of buildings located in the southeastern section of the city. The area was selected for its “representative” value in that it possessed many of the features of Phnom Penh in microcosm—shophouses, a market, a temple, school, hospital, and a number of traditional houses. Settled by the late-19th century, this area, known as Chbar Ampau, served as an important commercial hub at the point of a popular ferry crossing. Construction of a bridge in 1929 ensured further development in the area.

The present area consists of a densely built-up commercial district with a large market on the north and significant blocks of shophouses and residences to the south. Effectively abandoned as was the rest of Phnom Penh in the late 1970s, the area has since become a patchwork of older buildings overlain with many smaller wood buildings and shacks. Most of the “historic” buildings date from the period after construction of the bridge, or post-1929, and extend through around 1953–54.

The charge to the students was to unravel this history. Students initially mapped and surveyed a 12-block segment, including the core of older development. Individual forms were filled out on over 300 buildings and shopfront units. This number included both older or historic buildings and more recent additions as well in order

both to create a more complete record—a frozen moment from 1996—and because it was simply so difficult in the absence of written records or surviving local informants—many of the area’s original inhabitants had died during the Pol Pot period—to differentiate the old from the new.

Following the survey, more historical research was done. This was the task of the American students, in particular, who visited archives and libraries and spoke (usually through interpreters) to the few remaining older residents. The area was then mapped and final forms were keyed to the map.

This task completed, the students were assigned a single street front from one of their blocks to draw up. This was done at 1:100 scale and helped students develop a better understanding of the relationships among buildings, obtrusive newer additions (or deletions), and the presence of exceptional architecture. The final inked versions of the drawings were used in turn for the urban design exercise held in the last week.

The most technically challenging aspect of the course was the measured drawing exercise. Students were assigned nine buildings to measure and draw. Measurements were taken in accordance with the standards of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Measured to the 1/2 centimeter, the field notes were transcribed to measured drawings at 1:50 scale. Final drawings, which consisted of site plans, elevations and interior plans, were then completed in ink. These provide a permanent record of these rather simple, yet distinctive, buildings.

One implicit feature of the program and other programs such as this is to call attention to the need for historic preservation more generally. Historic preservation may at first appear to be a rarified specialty in a developing country such as Cambodia. However, as the tremendous interna-

tional tourist interest in the Angkor monuments demonstrates, culture and history have definite economic value. The outstanding colonial and vernacular architecture of Phnom Penh is, in fact, significant enough to serve as a complement to the famous sites at Siem Reap. Additionally, existing buildings have real economic value. They can be re-used, redeveloped, or simply maintained as continuing assets in a city that requires new investment in order to progress.

The 1996 field school made a small contribution to increasing public awareness. The school was covered in the local press, including an excellent short article in the *Cambodia Daily*. Local television news covered the “official” opening ceremony. There was also attendance by members of the public, government ministers, and embassy staffs. The closing event even featured the exquisite Royal Dancers and musicians.

At an international level, the program has received additional publicity. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* sent a journalist to cover the story. Both Professors Chapman and Leineweber made a presentation at the annual National Historic Preservation Conference last month. Overall, this is seen as simply a first step in developing further interest in the preservation of Cambodia’s significant historic architectural heritage.

In terms of research, we see the 1996 field school as a beginning as well. Measured drawings and other historical records, such as those produced this summer, can form the basis of a national program. While the program’s work represented only a modest beginning, it does provide a precedent for a more systematic undertaking. One proposal for 1997 is to extend the study to a provincial level, beginning with a field survey and then developing a program for measured drawings. Other possibilities are additional research on shophouses in Phnom Penh and other Cambodian cities, research on colonial architecture, and also further investigations of vernacular building traditions. All of these research avenues represent important new areas for both Cambodians and others. It is hoped that the University of Hawai‘i and the Royal University of Fine Arts can continue to collaborate for many years to come.

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A shophouse inventoried in the Chbar Ampau field area, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photo by Timothy Kojima, Cheam Pross, Eung Leang.

