



Marketing Triumph

One of the best examples of 1930s Art Deco architecture in Southeast Asia, bequeathed by the French, has survived war and civil strife as an everyday workplace in Phnom Penh



A 1960s bird's eye view (above) shows that little has changed around the cross-shaped market complex which today is still the focal point of daily bustle (left).

នៅក្នុងរូបភាពខ្ពស់នៃកំណែសម័យ ក្នុងឆ្នាំ ១៩៦០ (ខាងលើ) បង្ហាញថាមានការផ្លាស់ប្តូរតិចតួចទៅលើរូបភាពដែលមានភាពចាស់លើស្តីពី វិថីចេញវត្តចេញទៅពីចំណុចនៃការលក់ដូរមហាផ្ទៃក្នុងវិថី (ខាងឆ្វេង)

It's doubtful if any of the traders who create the daily bustle in Phnom Penh's noble edifice to Art Deco architecture, the Psah Thmei or new market, have ever heard of Ernest Hébrard. But it was the foresight of this French colonial town planner in the 1920s which was responsible for much of the Cambodian capital's present-day layout – and the airy, sunlit place where they trade clothing, fabrics, household wares, gold and precious stones, fresh fruit, vegetables and flowers, and a free-market currency exchange.

The Psah Thmei, constructed in Phnom Penh between 1935 and 1937, is almost certainly the grandest Art Deco-style market building in Southeast Asia. The modern design and technology employed ranks it as one of the most important 1930s buildings remaining in Phnom Penh. Eastern morning light illuminates the entrance while day's end turns the dome into a glowing yellow-orange hemisphere basking in the last rays of sun. A building loved and frequented by most Phnom

Penhois, Cambodians and foreigners alike, it dominates the commercial hub of the city.

The market is constructed entirely of ferroconcrete, its domed exterior rising majestically over the rows of apartments and Sino-Khmer shophouses lining the market square. At times, like some sci-fi alien spacecraft, it appears to hover effortlessly between buildings that line the street approaches.

It's not until you enter the market that you become aware of the immensity and height of the structure. The dome rises 26 metres above ground, while the main circular hall is 45 metres in diameter. The aisles, in the form of a cross, are each 44 metres in length. The interior of the market, lit naturally by filtered sunlight, is inviting, cool and breezy – a tribute to excellence in architectural design for Cambodia's often hot and humid climate.

The market's exterior structure is painted in the colours typical of the city's colonial buildings, a colour



scheme synonymous with Phnom Penh — a lime-based light yellow combined with white-highlighted decorative features.

The arch-supported dome soars above an incredible volume of free space from four buttressed corners. Superbly styled deco chevron grills admit soft streams of daylight that punctuate the dome, walls and wings. Panes of pale yellow glass tint the natural light and accentuate the dusty gold of the interior. A variant form of the decorative chevron motif is in the ironwork grills above the doorways. Below the dome is an original slender column supporting archaic clocks frozen in time at a few minutes past 10, ironically surrounded by

islands of vendors selling timepieces, gold and gemstones.

It remains a superior market, both in terms of price and quality. Goods sold here are often not found elsewhere in the city. The market trades 360 days of the year, seven days a week from dawn till dusk. The few closed days include the two holiday periods in the Cambodian calendar associated with the Chinese and Khmer New Years.

The inner sanctum of the market generally remains quiet, and business is conducted in a leisurely manner. Outside, in the blazing light and heat of the day, myriad covered temporary stalls specializing in consumer wares have sprung up along narrow meandering lanes populated with noisy hawkers who all vie for your attention. Originally, the market was instead lined with trees and had geometric gardens within the eastern triangular entranceway.

Phnom Penh is subject to periodic flooding; and, historically, drainage has been a problem. In the 1890s, the French colonial administration made attempts to drain the city by digging a series of interlinked canals. Infilling small, natural lakes has raised the ground level of much of the present city. Low-lying sites for both Hotel Le Royal and Psah Thmei required such treatment. For the market, huge pipes were employed to discharge alluvial sandy soil pumped from the Tonle Sap River into Boeung Decho. HM King Sisowath Monivong ordered this former lake filled in March 1928 to create the expanse of land upon which the market was built

