

**THE CAMBODIAN TALIESIN – unloved modern house - shunned architect  
Helen Grant Ross, Architect d.p.l.g., D.E.A. France**



*FIG 1 line sketch of the house by Rottany Keo, Architect RUFA, Phnom Penh that highlights the complex composition*

## **INTRODUCTION**

After Cambodia gained independence from France in 1953, an unprecedented experiment in development took place, as documented by the author and Darryl Collins **(1)**. Under the impulse of HM Norodom Sihanouk, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum régime<sup>1</sup> (1955-1970) promoted the construction of thousands of buildings throughout the Kingdom in a style that has been coined 'New Khmer'.**(3 & 5)**

The most outstanding architect among the numerous contributors to this unique architecture is Vann Molyvann, born November 23<sup>rd</sup> 1924, who trained at ENSBA, (Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris) from 1948-1955 and whose destiny seems to be entwined with his own country's. He realized around one hundred works in less than 15 years to a consistently high level of creativity and was then forced to flee in 1970 with the American-backed military coup of General Lon Nol.

New Khmer Architecture was cut in the bud by the succession of tragic events that Cambodia suffered in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; internal strife and the overflow of the Vietnam War at the end of the 1960s; a military dictatorship 1970-1975; genocide and the Khmer Rouge 1975-1978; Vietnamese occupation 1978-1991 and a civil war that only ceased in 1999.

One of the effects of this tragedy, aggravated by an international embargo from 1979-1991, was to remove Cambodia from the world map at the same time as thirty years of war and deprivation erased this positive part of Cambodian history from the collective memory.

The Cambodian experiment, as its buildings still stand to bear witness, demonstrates that great architecture does not necessarily rise out of richly endowed societies, but rather from cohesive ones. **(5)** Had this unusual architectural movement continued to flourish it would likely have become a well-documented part of world history and Vann Molyvann would have gained the recognition he merits. Indeed, in the 1960s this was already beginning to be the case as international interest testifies<sup>2</sup>.

Without international recognition, this prolific and unique Cambodian modern heritage is under threat of extinction before it has even been recognized for its true value.

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<sup>1</sup> Prince Sihanouk's association of friends of the nation cum political party

<sup>2</sup> Cahiers du Centre Scientifique et Technique du Batiment no 73, April 1964 *Forum de la Ville de Phnom Penh* Paris Rassegna dei lavori pubblici no 4, April 1965 *Complesso Olimpico del Sud-Est Asiatico Foro Della Citta di Phnom Penh* place of publication unknown

Architecture d'Aujourd'hui no 116 novembre 1964 *complexe olympique de Phnom Penh* Cambodge Paris Techniques et Architecture v 25, 1965 *complexe olympique et Forum de Phnom Penh* Paris

Today in Cambodia **(6)** it is no exaggeration to say that there is no commitment whatsoever to any values except monetary ones. After the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991 one of the severest communist regimes in the World switched to one of the most extreme liberal free for all's in the World with no rule of law or judicial system to compensate. The issue of conservation in such a political climate is not only a waste of time; in a country where 80% of the population live on less than \$1 a day it is almost obscene to evoke the question of heritage when the most important issue is short-term survival.

The enlightened era of the Sangkum is seen as a thorn in the heel of the present Government, as it throws a disturbing light on its nepotism and cultural indifference.

The object of this paper is twofold; to draw international attention to the issue of modern heritage in Cambodia in general and to raise support to assist Vann Molyvann in ensuring the preservation for posterity of his home and personal archives. In 20 years' time will the 'Taliesin' of one of the greatest modern Asian architects have become a place of pilgrimage or will it have disappeared with his legacy? How can this conference contribute to preserving not only a significant building but the memory of one of the most talented architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Vann is aware that the author is presenting this paper.

### **THE CAMBODIAN TALIESIN**

Built on the outskirts of Phnom Penh towards the end of Sihanouk's Sangkum Neastr Riyum régime **(5)**, an amazing house stands in what is now one of the most coveted commercial streets of the burgeoning city. Fully documented by the author **(2)**, it is the private residence and office of the talented Cambodian architect, Vann Molyvann, and one of his most enigmatic works.

Commenced in 1966 it has regained its initial function as the private residence of the Vann family, plus the architect's professional 'atelier' and servants' quarters.

The distinguishing feature of this unique design is the shell structure of the roof which is an exercise in hyperbolic parabolic curves that required calculation from his engineer brother-in-law. The volume is almost cubic and divided into five split levels – the open-plan living area is housed under the roof.

It goes unnoticed to most passers' by and is hard to locate in Phnom Penh's urban chaos where each piece of land is filled to overflowing with nondescript ever higher humdrum buildings on plots that are worth their weight in gold in the present explosive speculative free for all real estate market. This is fuelled by corruption, money laundering, the absence of a proper land register and lack of any commitment to urban planning by the local authorities.

The house's unique design mirrors the creative 1960s era. It is hard to believe now, but as documented **(1)** in those days Phnom Penh was the most vibrant and beautiful city in Asia.

In 1991, with Vann's intervention, the site of Angkor was listed a UNESCO World Heritage site right after the Paris Peace agreement. Today the Khmer mountain temple of Preah Vihear rivets the attention while Cambodia and Thailand argue about its UNESCO status and national boundaries. In contrast, all the remarkable New Khmer Architecture is under threat. It is unloved, misunderstood, neglected, too modern to be considered picturesque enough to mobilize conservationists. There is no political desire or legislation to protect it. Although there is a small but ever gathering international awareness about this modern heritage **(7)**, as Robert Turnbull writes: *'rather than celebrate the achievements of Sihanouk's "golden age" the government of Prime Minister Hun Sen seems to go to considerable lengths to undermine it. To the dismay of international groups attempting to stimulate cultural continuity, Vann has been largely shunned by the political establishment in Cambodia. When UNESCO organized a conference on how to protect this legacy and designated Vann as its head, it had to disinvite him after complaints by the government. Rarely consulted on the fate of his buildings, Vann has been forced to watch from the sidelines while his work has been ripped out or ineptly renovated.'* **(8)**

Four of Vann's greatest works illustrate the fate that awaits this modern heritage:

**1. The National Sports Complex**, built to Olympic standards, inaugurated 1964, the 40 hectare site was sold by the Minister of Education to a Taiwanese private developer in 2001 in some occult deal. It has been filled up with low-grade constructions. The ensemble is under threat of destruction (1, 4, 6 & 9)

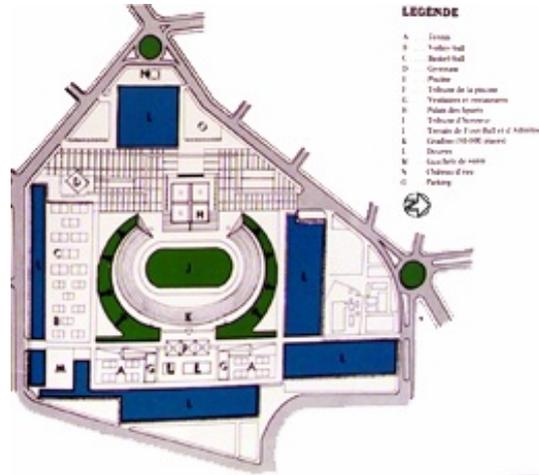


FIG 2 Original 1960s site plan showing the important moats for drainage and water treatment station that are an integral part of the design



FIG 3 1960s aerial view showing, from left to right, the 8000 seat sports hall and tribune, the 60000 seat stadium, the swimming and diving pools and 16 external courts in the foreground



FIG 4 2004 view of the sports hall



FIG 5 houses and shops built by the Taiwanese developer on the walls of the drainage moats, with no foundations. The invaluable drainage system has been converted into an underground car park.

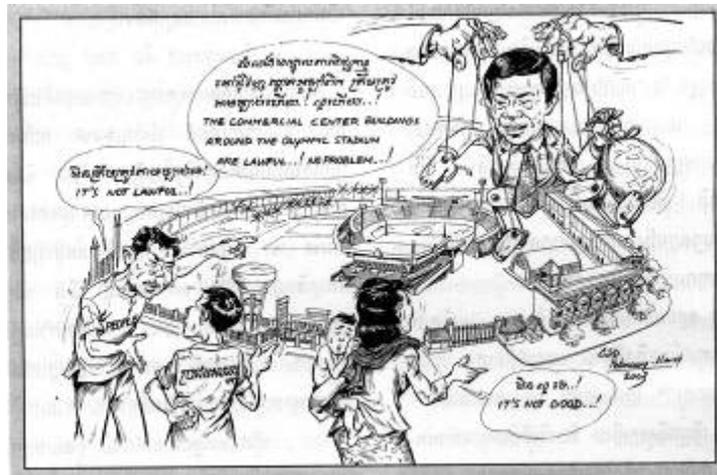


FIG 6 cartoon in the Centre for Social Development Bulletin, 2003, criticizing the Minister of Education, Youth and Sport for selling off state property

**2. National Theatre Preah Suramarit**, inaugurated 1968, severely destroyed by a fire due to negligent roof welders in 1995, sold to Cambodian tycoon Kith Meng by the Minister of Culture 2005 - demolished 2008 (1,10,11)



FIG 7 1960s view of the Theatre on the banks of the Bassac river

This magnificent theatre was designed for indoor and outdoor scenic arrangements for 1,200 spectators, with a mobile backstage drop. It offered an alternative to the tradition of seats facing the stage. The spatial arrangement was superb, like a 'theatre within a theatre' for audiences to view the split-level foyer in the sharpest point of the triangle that offered magnificent views over the Bassac, evocative of a ship steaming down the river.

**3. Royal University of Phnom Penh Teacher Training School**, inaugurated 1972 it was maintained until recently by French cooperation. Today it is boxed in with new constructions that destroy its significant landscaped grounds. (1, 3 & 5)



FIG 8 1970s view of the Teacher Training Labs, Main Hall and Library on the right



FIG 9 recent view inside the main hall

The entrance of what is now the Institute of Languages consisted of a monumental bridge crossing a baray, (that was recently filled in) complete with nagas reminiscent of Angkorian temples. The complex composition combines a massive main building, a round library inspired by a straw hat and a row of eccentric training workshops. The main building gives a strong sculptural effect as if extractions and cavities have been made in a primitive cube. This is reinforced by the contrast of red brick and white concrete and light and shade that play on the numerous volumes of the roof and sun-screens. This last mature work was inaugurated after Vann Molyvann left the country.



FIG 10 2005 view of the 'Angkorian' moats that have since been filled and converted into car parks

### Vann Molyvann's house on Mao Tse Toung Bd, Phnom Penh

When Vann Molyvann d.p.l.g.<sup>3</sup> returned in 1957, after nearly ten years abroad, he discovered that his country had undergone enormous change. Sihanouk had undertaken a gigantic development plan and promptly heaped heavy responsibilities on his protégé, appointing him Chief Architect of the Kingdom responsible for all state buildings at the age of 30, founding Rector of the University of Fine Arts (1965) and Minister of Education (1967).

Within a short period from 1957 to 1970 he would build around one hundred works, all to the very highest standard of construction and design. Like the examples given above, most of these were public buildings; the Council of Ministers, Chaktomuk Conference Hall, the Ministry of Finance, the State Palace, the National Bank of Cambodia in Sihanoukville, and public housing projects such as the athletes' village and the National Bank of Cambodia staff housing. As a civil servant, his salary was modest, especially as he had a large family with six children, so it was not until he was given the private commission to design the SKD<sup>4</sup> Brewery in 1966, that he earned any significant fees with which he was able to buy himself a plot measuring of 1000 M2 on Mao Tse Toung Bd on which to build his own house.

The house is anything but ordinary. Whereas it could be said that Vann's public buildings emulate the aspirations of a nation that had suffered colonialism and was asserting its own authenticity and values, due to its private and personal dimension, his house does not need to do that. But it certainly demonstrates his ongoing creative quest as an artist, probably more than any of his other buildings. It is unique; from its urban relationship at a 45° angle to the road; to the intricate internal space; to its proportions using the Modulor; to the unusual composition of the facades right up to the parabolic hyperbolic roof. He applied himself even more carefully to the design of in its every detail, than to his other buildings, just as he granted a large space in his everyday life for his family.

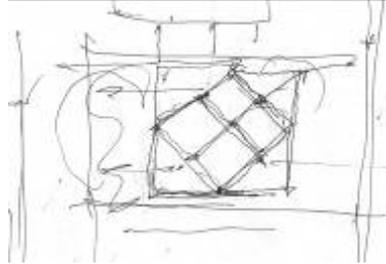


FIG 11 architect's sketch showing the unusual concept of a square within a square and its relation to the site in which the 45° angle offers good aspects to all four sides

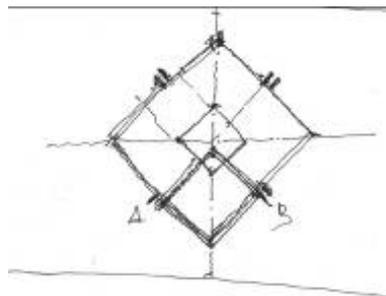


FIG 12 architect's sketch showing the hyperbolic/parabolic roof plan

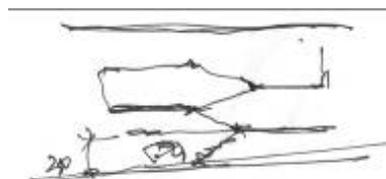


FIG 13 architect's sketch showing a section of the five split levels

<sup>3</sup> d.p.l.g. – architect diplômé par le gouvernement (French state qualified architect)

<sup>4</sup> Société Khmère des Distilleries, a show-case factory in Sihanoukville inaugurated in 1968

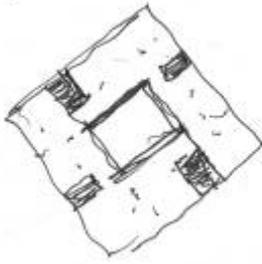


FIG 14 architect's sketch of the inside plan showing the interlocking L's and stair-well



FIG 15 architect's sketch showing the climatic response of the double-layered roof and cross ventilation



FIG 16 1960's view – the whole of the top floor is a split level living-room and kitchen of the floor plans. Shaded areas are bathrooms.



FIG 17 1960's view showing the complex detailing of the façade



FIG 18 detail of the regulated steel structure of the ph with Walter Amberg, Vann's engineer brother in law



FIG 19 hyperbolic/parabolic roof under construction.

The measurement of the basic square is 18.30 M x 18.30 M (334.89M<sup>2</sup>) derived from the Modulor. This corresponds to half the span of one of the four 'umbrellas' of the Sports Palace in the National Sports Complex, each measuring 36.60 x 36.60. The 'core' square therefore measures 12.94 x 12.94 (167.44M<sup>2</sup>). The total inhabitable area measures approx. 420M<sup>2</sup>.

**top floor** The living room and kitchen, housed under the full span of the roof (with chimney for cooking on charcoal the traditional way), is open plan, but each area is distinct from the other, separated by a few steps, a balustrade, or the double stair giving access to it. As the architect says 'you can choose which stair you like – the right hand or the left hand one!'



FIG 20 - 22 interior views (VM 1960s pics)

**intermediary levels** They comprise of a master bedroom with bathroom (for parents), a second large bedroom with bathroom (for his two daughters), four smaller bedrooms with two bathrooms (for his four sons). All the bedrooms had tatamis. The architect's idea of family life was that each of his six children should have their own 'space'. Grouped two by two, each bedroom had an additional space for study and play. The master bedroom has an extra wing to accommodate 'the last baby'.

**lower level** This houses the architect's atelier/office, staff quarters, a car port and broad protective entrance canopies created by the triangular terraces above.

This is the Cambodian Taliesin. If we accept that an architect's own house is like a mirror of his soul then his house reveals Vann Molyvann as a man. Like all his buildings it integrates new ideas, knowledge and experiences. It reveals to what extent he never succumbed to any style, but only developed his own. Here, he jokes about the inspiration for the concept (Swiss church and chalet, Brazilian straw roof and ph). He definitely does not fit, nor does he wish to fit into a box; Modern, new trad, post-modern, Wrightien. Instead he seems rebelliously amused at any vain attempt to associate him with a movement.

## THE CAMBODIAN CONTEXT

Thanks to UNESCO's commitment to Angkor (World Heritage since December 1992) one of the most remarkable historic sites of the world is under close scrutiny – and protection. Apart from that the whole structure of good governance and law in Cambodia has to be rebuilt and this takes time – and will-power. Cultural issues in general and conservation of modern heritage in particular, reap no profit and therefore do not motivate the powers that be.

**1. There is no legal framework** or national policy that can be pulled out of a drawer and applied. There is no concept of "national heritage" or "historic monument" and no laws exist that could be applied. The Municipality of Phnom Penh has listed 200 colonial buildings, under guidance by French cooperation, but has no law to enforce protection of these.

**2. The effect of war**, genocide and suffering has been to anaesthetize society to issues of common interest in favour of survival strategies, catching up for lost time, and short-term profit. Altruistic concerns are of no concern.

**3. This architecture is too recent to be identified as being picturesque**, and is easily written off as being 'just concrete'. If this "New Khmer Architecture" is to be preserved it first has to be recognized for what it represents. This requires it being identified, **(1)** publicized, **(the present ICOMOS conference)** understood (??) – and then protected.

**4. This ignorance leads to indifference.** Recently it was surprising to hear a Vice Governor of Phnom Penh defend colonial architecture at the same time as he criticized this architecture

“for not being Khmer”. It needs to be promoted as a valuable National asset of authentic Cambodian origin.

**5. Economic market forces** are at work to make the land coveted for other uses. In Cambodia today public property and private takeover in occult deals with the Government is the commonest denominator threatening all of this 1960s heritage.

#### **A FEW EXAMPLES OF WHAT IS HAPPENING AT PRESENT TO VANN'S HERITAGE**

**Public property – Private takeover - the National Sports Complex (4 6 & 9).** To the Cambodians who remember, this complex is as much an icon as the Sydney Opera House is to Australians. Despite this, in 2000, the Cambodian government signed an occult deal with a private Taiwanese developer to renovate the complex in exchange for the right to develop the so-called ‘idle’ land. Today nobody knows how this contract stands. No renovation has taken place. But the so-called ‘idle’ land composed of moats and drainage systems, tennis courts, car parks and other infrastructure that are an integral part of the design have been built on with lucrative profits. This has rendered the complex incapable of holding public events with 100.000 participants such as it was designed for. Flooding has become a recurrent problem as the drainage system no longer functions. Boxed in with shoddy constructions it is now invisible from the street and city-dwellers are forgetting its existence. **The future of this valuable asset for Cambodia's image and development is severely compromised.**

**Public property – Private takeover - the National Theatre Preah Suramarit (11)** Sometimes well-intentioned renovation work turns into a catastrophe. Such was the case with the magnificent National Theatre when a welder repairing a roof joist set the building on fire leading to its destruction in 1995. Today one wonders if it was really an accident. Destroying the theatre gave the Ministry of Culture an excuse for selling off the land to a private developer without public enquiry, transparency and a contract that ensures that the public benefits from the deal. **Demolished**

**Public property – International aid – the Institute of Languages (previous Teacher Training college), Phnom Penh** was leased to French Cooperation who renovated and maintained it in its integrity until 2006. This enabled it to continue to function as an invaluable teaching facility. However, in 2005, JICA was allowed to encroach onto the site with a new construction, the moats have been filled in, the gigantic rain trees cut down, and the integrity of the building is hence compromised. **Maintained but landscape destroyed**

**Commercial use - SKD Brewery.** Since 1995 a Malaysian company produces, sells and exports beer and soft drinks manufactured in the original buildings with the initial industrial plant. The industrial buildings and staff housing have been renovated. They continue to be used in their initial function successfully as a ‘show-case factory’. **Maintained**

**Public use – Ministerial buildings.** The Council of Ministers was demolished in 2008. The land, in one of the most sought after central locations of the capital attracted the interest of a Chinese investor, who in exchange for a high rise complex offered to house the existing ministerial facilities. At the Ministry of Defence ungainly tiled roofs have been added on in an attempt to ‘Khmerize’ this modern architecture. **Compromised or demolished**

**Economics.** As with the National Sports Complex or the Teacher Training College, the temptation is great to opportunistically ‘fill in’ the unbuilt space surrounding buildings although they were an integral part of the original plan and function. **Landscape ruined**

**Politics (5).** Except for the regions of Kompong Thom (bombed by the USA) Kep and Sihanoukville (site of conflict between Cambodia and Vietnam and later long-term Khmer Rouge occupation) most of the modern heritage of the Sangkum era survived amazingly intact. The cities were evacuated by the Khmer Rouge and the well-designed and well-built buildings survived well without the impact of socio-economic forces. But since 1991 the deals between the Government and private speculators have gained momentum. There is no transparency, no public interest, just short term money to be gained by the pyramid structure of the Cambodian Government. The whole country is up for sale – or sold.

**The House of Vann Molyvann (2)**, encapsulates not only the genius of his architecture but is the home of someone, who, one day, will inevitably become a hero of the nation. The problem is that when an awareness of his extraordinary legacy arises it may be too late; the property could be grabbed for the \$2 or \$3 million price tag on its 1000 M2 plot and the house demolished in favour of short term speculative interests.

Now 84 years old and Senior Privy Counsellor to HM Norodom Sihanouk, Vann was the first qualified Cambodian architect and by far the most outstanding. In the 1990s, he and his wife Trudy were fortunate to regain ownership but they worry about what will happen to their house in the future. Even if they leave their property to their rightful inheritors, their 5 surviving children, there is no guarantee that they will be able to retain ownership.

### **WHAT SOLUTION?**

Like many great architects, to cite but two of the most illustrious; Frank Lloyd Wright<sup>5</sup> and Le Corbusier<sup>6</sup>, Vann is aware of the value of the legacy he will leave behind him. Like them he wonders if it would be possible to create a foundation that would preserve his house and the memory of his work, comprising of his photographs, archives, some plans (though most were lost after he was forced to leave the country in the 1970s), his other works for the UN and publications.

But how can this be done in the challenging context of a country where there is no rule of law, no town planning, no respect for cultural issues of any kind?

In view of the lack of legal framework and chronic land-grabbing in Cambodia, the question is how can Vann Molyvann's house and heritage be preserved? Setting up a Foundation to promote knowledge about his legacy and ensure that the Cambodian people in 50 years time will be able to serenely recollect the first illustrious modern Khmer architect, is one step. But how can the problem of land grabbing be overcome? Would it be viable for a sponsor country to chaperone the Foundation and under the protection of diplomatic rights ensure its future and proper implementation

What follow-up can this conference offer?

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#### **<sup>5</sup> About The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation**

The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation was established in 1940 as the repository of the life work of Frank Lloyd Wright. The Foundation maintains its international headquarters at Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona.

The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation is committed to advancing the ideas and principles of organic architecture, organic education, and conservation of the natural environment. The Foundation also seeks to preserve and enhance the lifetime contributions and ideas of Frank Lloyd Wright, and make available to the public opportunities to study and experience organic architecture.

#### **<sup>6</sup> About The Le Corbusier Foundation**

Anxious to avoid the breaking up of his studies, plans and some of his visual work, Le Corbusier had, before his death, laid the groundwork for a foundation to which he bequeathed all his property. Officially created by a decree of 31 July 1968, the Foundation Le Corbusier was set up in Villas Jeanneret and La Roche, at 8-10 Square du Docteur Blanche in Paris (16th arrondissement).

The goals of the Foundation, as laid down in its statutes, are to receive, acquire, restore, preserve and make known to the public by all appropriate means (exhibitions, publications, lectures, colloquia, films, etc) the original works, notes, manuscripts, documents, property and various objects, especially those handed over, bequeathed or transferred by Le Corbusier, to the Foundation.

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- 11 *Le Théâtre Brûlé* film by Cambodian film-maker Rithy Panh 2005

website of the Fondation le Corbusier  
website of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation