Preserved French colonial structures may be tourism assets

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The Cambodia Post office building in the capital's Daun Penh district built during the French colonial era.

A city is not purely defined by its high-rise buildings and modern roads infrastructure – historic buildings are also hugely important to its liveability and charm while attracting cultural tourism.

In Cambodia, colonial-era heritage buildings, constructed in a combination of French and Khmer styles, attract a large number of foreign tourists each year, according to officials.

But renovations away from their original style and even the demolition of some of these buildings in recent years show that the participation of all stakeholders is needed to protect and preserve them for future generations.

This would ensure the continued study and understanding of the architectural patterns of these structures, and strengthen the good and lasting cooperation between Cambodia and France.

French ambassador to Cambodia Jacques Pellet on May 18 met with Phnom Penh municipal governor Khuong Sreng and on June 22 with Battambang provincial governor Sok Lou to discuss the issues.

At the meetings, he complimented Cambodia's efforts, despite some having been demolished or renovated away from their original style, in protecting and preserving the famous heritage buildings from the French protectorate era in Cambodia.

"These heritage buildings contribute significantly to attracting foreign tourists to visit Cambodia, providing a lot of income for development in other areas to improve the living standards of the Cambodian people," he said.

Pellet requested that the two governors carry on protecting the buildings so they will continue to attract tourists, and preserve culture and history for a long time to come. He promised to help mobilise French businesspeople to invest in Cambodia, especially in Phnom Penh and Battambang province.

According to a 2016 study by a group of French experts in Phnom Penh, there were 523 French colonial structures, including 448 residential buildings.

The study divided the buildings into four categories, with 34 belonging in the first, 24 in the second, 17 in the third and 448 in the fourth. Battambang boasted around 800 historical buildings, Kampot province some 500, and Kratie province almost 100.



A historical colonial building sits on the corner of a fairly sleepy street in Battambang City. POST STAFF

The Phnom Penh Department of Culture and Fine Arts had recorded 320 French colonial buildings in the capital, said its director Chum Vuthy.

Daun Penh district of the capital contained the most buildings which remained in beautiful condition, particularly the Cambodia Post office building, the National Treasury, Raffles Hotel Le Royal and Preah Sisowath High School.

“Some of the magnificent buildings which remain from the French colonial era have been preserved under the management of the private sector, while many others have been demolished or renovated badly.

“Some of these renovations mean the historic buildings now differ from their original style, with some having completely lost their distinctive design features and appearance,” said Vuthy, who is also vice-chairman of the standing committee of the French Colonial Heritage Preservation Project in Phnom Penh.

He added that a lack of budget and legal documentation meant preserving the French-era heritage buildings under private management was not easy, especially those in which people were residing.

“Because our state still lacks the budget to support the people who own the historical buildings left over from the French era, some in Phnom Penh have been completely renovated, despite many having been maintained in authentic style,” Vuthy said.

Tous Sapheoun, deputy secretary-general of the Board of Architects Cambodia (BAC), said the colonial buildings served three main functions. The first was to mark the areas where French people lived at that time; the second was serving as the offices of high-ranking French officials; the third was to show the influence of colonialism in Cambodia.

“Most of the French colonial heritage buildings were built in 1907, 1928 and 1939, with many still intact despite being more than 100 years old. So we have to preserve these buildings to show the history of that time,” Sapheoun said.

Cambodia Association of Travel Agents adviser Ho Vandy said French colonial-era buildings played an important role in attracting large numbers of tourists, with French and other foreign visitors expanding their travel to visit destinations like Battambang, and other provinces such as Kampot and Kratie.

“The French-colonial era buildings really attract tourists because people like to seek out historical buildings and understand how people lived,” he said.

Certain tourists did not want to stay in newly built modern hotels, preferring to find guesthouses or hotels built in the French era for longer stays, he said.

Vandy called this group “cultural tourists”, because in addition to visiting the usual sites of interest, they also sought to learn about the art, architecture, culture, traditions and lifestyles of the people in the area.

This was why to attract greater numbers of visitors, the tourism sector had requested the government to preserve the old buildings.

Vandy said the sector not only sought to make profits, but also listened to the requests of tourists, such as for the area in front of the Royal Palace to demonstrate the Khmer identity. To this end, the historic identity of Phnom Penh should be preserved, and not just have high-rise buildings constructed everywhere.

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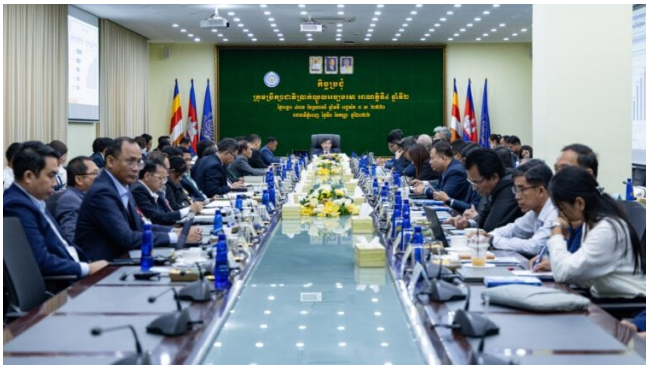
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