

FOREGROUND / NOW

EDITED BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER



LEFT
Before, residents had no place to meet. Families adjacent to the street contributed labor and materials.

BELOW LEFT
A retractable awning shades the new street, which doubles as a gathering space.



(IUCI) to design and build a new street and flexible meeting space in Pongro Senchey, which occupies a public road on the southwest side of the city. It is a narrow, ramshackle neighborhood often just one corrugated metal structure wide. Although the poverty here is acute, a new city representative had been elected and was promising to support the community. For the first time in 15 years, residents were not under threat of being relocated.

That was the good news. The bad news was that the city was gobbling up the surrounding wetlands, exacerbating the flooding that already plagued the area. "During the rainy season, the neighborhood was completely inundated," says Ben Spencer, a cofounder of IUCI and an associate professor of landscape architecture at UW. "If a rainstorm came, they could have water up to their waists for several days."

Through workshops and other activities, IUCI and the students helped the community identify its biggest needs: first, a place to gather; second, improved pedestrian and vehicular access throughout the settlement. The UW team worked alongside architecture students from the

A SEAT IN THE STREET

ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF PHNOM PENH, DESIGNERS JUGGLE PUBLIC SPACE AND MOTOR VEHICLES.

BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER

Jess Hamilton, Student ASLA, sat with the women from Pongro Senchey, a settlement on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, sewing canvas into what appeared to be pillowcases. On the other side of a concrete wall were the garment factories where several of the women worked, and Hamilton, a graduate student in landscape architecture at the University of Washington (UW), reflected on her earlier career path: fashion design. "The fashion industry is driving those garment factories, and I was so glad that I was there visiting the community that lives *between* the garment factories," she says.

Hamilton was one of six landscape architecture students who spent the past spring working with the Informal Urban Communities Initiative

COURTESY BEN SPENCER

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LEFT
Lined with coconut coir, the canvas planters were the product of sewing workshops—an effort to give local women marketable skills.

“THEY WANTED A MORE BEAUTIFUL COMMUNITY.”

—BEN SPENCER

Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh to design an eight-foot-wide street that, along one 30-foot stretch, transforms into a public venue. A retractable canopy provides shelter from Cambodia’s harsh sun and pounding rains, and deployable furniture can be folded up so as not to impede access.

A drainpipe below the street should provide some relief from the flooding, but Spencer says residents were as concerned with aesthetics. “They wanted a more beautiful community,” he says. “That’s always really affirming as a designer, that it’s not just about the nuts and bolts; it’s about a synthetic process that combines the functional aspects of a road and a drainpipe with

the more holistic idea that you’re going to improve the quality of the environment.”

Which is where Hamilton’s canvas hanging planters come in. Quilted into an elegant, modular hanging garden, the planters beautify a wall originally built to hem residents in, providing vegetation that helps cool the gathering space. More important, the team used the project to teach several women how to sew, a skill that could help them get jobs. Spencer says that although Pongro Senchey appears unique, its constraints are “common to the billion people who live in informal urban settlements around the world. Thinking about how we can take a three-meter-wide strip and turn it into a park that can allow vehicles to go through it is something you could apply worldwide.” ●

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