

## Dwellings in the aftermath of conflict

### Introduction

As a child in her third grade history class, I vividly recall one particular day when the class was reading a passage on some historically relevant war fought by an equally important conqueror. I have no recollection whatsoever of the name of the conqueror, the date or year or even the place, but the one thing etched in my memory is a part of the story of that war.

*Upon defeating the enemy, the conqueror surveyed the battlegrounds in satisfaction. Coming across an old frail lady, he looked to her for praise on his successful quest. However, she opened his eyes to the destruction of life he had caused and asked him if this were a quest to be proud of.*

I do not know what became of the conqueror or the lady beyond this point in the story, but unanimous across the world and time, conflicts have meant despair, terror and a total sabotage of everything considered safe up until then. They destroy the notion of reality, upending the lives of the affected to face a new reality overnight. Often, the ensuing atrocities test the best in ourselves when ironically, conflicts themselves are a result of our worst selves.

### Conflict as inherent

Several South East Asian countries are no strangers to conflict, being subjected to diverse experiences such as colonisation, rebellions and wars, forcing many of these countries to rethink and restart the livelihoods of their populace. At this juncture, it then becomes vital to understand the varying degree of effect that conflicts have on societies within the Asian context.

Conflict is defined as 'competitive or opposing action of incompatibles'.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Colin Priest<sup>2</sup> argues that conflicts are inherent to any society and are meant to challenge existing social order and ideas. He further explicates that it is the level of impact conflict has had on existing social order that determines whether it can be resolved internally by communities. When the conflict situation becomes unmanageable, it could then turn into violence. To explore the effect that varying degrees of conflict can have on societies and specifically their dwellings, a contextual understanding of the conflict itself becomes the starting line.

#### ***The Great East Asia War (WW2) - Japan***

*The World War II is one of the most popular examples of a large-scale conflict in the South East Asian geography, with the Japanese death toll ranging between 70-85 million people. Following Japan's preemptive attack on Pearl Harbour, they signed a treaty with Germany and Italy that they would support one another in case of an attack, a day following which the US declared war. What ensued was the devastation of 67 cities through air raides, strategic bombing and atomic bombs, namely Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which eventually led to the Japanese surrender.*

#### ***The Khmer Rouge - Cambodia***

*Post its period of French protection, Cambodia flourished as a constitutional monarchy until 1975, when Lon Nol ousted the king, bringing with him the onset of a rebellion which has come to*

*be known as the 'Khmer Rouge'. What began as an attempt to simplify the lives into an agrarian culture turned into one of the world's most horrific genocides of close to 2.5 million people. It aimed to abolish the societal structure that had existed thus far - removing any trace of individualism in favour of a communist society. Any signs of development and elitism thus far were rejected, which meant concepts of education, economy were rejected. It took efforts till 1993 for the monarchy to be restored under Norodom Sihanouk, with help from the UN, eventually leading to political stability by means of a democracy under the monarchy, which is in practice till date.*

Both these scenarios are indicative of conflicts that have varying impacts on their respective populace and it is interesting to understand where dwellings are placed amid the turmoil. The role of dwellings in conflict and their position in the aftermath will allow one to better understand the historical, economical, psychological and societal effects that dictate the construct of South East Asian dwellings as we know them today.

### **Role of Dwellings in Conflicts**

When conflicts involve the destruction of property, dwellings and historically relevant buildings are often the first targets. The destruction of historical buildings is meant to eradicate any threads of identity, importance and the semblance of a social structure. What citizens consider as an emblem of their community are often destroyed to send a wave of threat and fear. Dwellings, on the other hand, are destroyed as a sign of claim, when alternate modes of expression are undermined. They are a means that tyrants resort to, in order for their voices to be heard and their threats acknowledged. The destruction of dwellings also contributes to an 'ethnic' cleansing of the region, exacerbating a feeling of unrest and insecurity in a place that was once 'home'. It leads to the eradication of local and traditional buildings, building techniques and wipes out the history of buildings in that region.<sup>3</sup>

*In the World War II, urban centers of Japan and North Korea were specifically bombed as a strategic response; It was the enemy's only means to have an upper hand against the numerical superiority of Japanese and North Korean allies combined.<sup>4</sup>*

*Under the Khmer Rouge, millions were sent to work on agricultural fields to create a class-less, agrarian society. The educated middle class were targeted and killed, driven by a need to eradicate any forms of development. Private property, money and religion were destroyed. Cities were emptied out with the aim to create a nation with no social institutions of the modern world yet be self-sufficient.<sup>5</sup>*

### **In the Aftermath**

In a post conflict era multiple issues arise that need to be addressed and are often interdependent. There are the immediate issues of economic instability, housing and political stability that call for attention, which are exacerbated by the cultural confusion and identity dilution left behind, needing the governing body to build reassurance on all fronts. Gradually, this reassurance is built literally with buildings and infrastructure as the most obvious signs of development. In the face of a new

beginning, what then becomes the way forward? In search for a fundamental level of comfort, safety and trust, dwellings often become the place to start. They become a haven within which people begin to aspire for a thriving life, as opposed to merely surviving. With the reassurance of a tomorrow, dwellings become one of the first priorities in the aftermath. They not only actively offer job opportunities, housing options and entertainment as respite, the buildings themselves become icons - emblems of reassurance of active efforts towards a better tomorrow.

Most governing bodies would view the calm after the storm as a clean slate and an opportunity to construct their new way forward. One of the primary initiatives that occur are the restoration, preservation and conservation of historic buildings which can often present a conundrum. In a fear of hampering the authenticity of a traditional structure or to misrepresent a structure in its reconstruction, architectural endeavors can often neglect the fundamental requirements of citizens to heal. The efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa acknowledged four kinds of truths – a forensic truth which describes what happened, where, when; a narrative truth of personal recollection; a social truth, which is a truth of the experience after debate and discussion; and a healing truth that reconciles conflicting elements in society and a sense of community.<sup>6</sup> It has been apparent from past efforts that architectural attempts often overlook the healing truth, which is in direct tandem with architecture's potential for peace.

Oftentimes, this also means the instating of a new architectural style, expressive of the new era. In retrospect, it is also interesting to note on what criteria the architectural development in the post-conflict eras are contingent upon. Following World War II, the US occupying forces governed the recovery of Japan, spearheading military, political, economic, and social reforms for the next seven years. The immediate need for housing post-war was met with rapid construction resulting in poor quality of the structures. The constant revision of housing codes also led to a short life span of 30 years for the constructed buildings. This has led to the culture of Japanese buildings being replaced every third decade with newer versions of their former shadows. Perhaps the short life of a building then allows designers and planners to review the direction of progress and gauge the way forward, aiding the planning body to stay on top of challenges like density and sub-urban development. Dwellings then are short-lived, serving their purpose for a generation and proceeding to be torn down subsequently. They are simply viewed as a means to an end, a shelter from which to make one's way through life.

As a contrast, in the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge rebellion has left the country in a state worse than it was earlier. What began as an attempt to simplify the lives into an agrarian culture turned into one of the world's most horrific genocides. It aimed to abolish the societal structure that had existed thus far - removing any trace of individualism in favour of a communist society. Any signs of development and elitism thus far were rejected, which meant concepts of education, economy were rejected. The biggest blow from the entire Khmer Rouge was that it destroyed and deprived the country of development for its people.

This is most evident in the cityscape of its capital Phnom Penh, where trendy mansions and measly tenements stand side by side. Locals account that the mansions belong to the aristocracy, exacerbating the irony of its past and only widening the gap between the rich and the poor. Houses in the countryside are still characterized by the simplistic nature of the Khmer Rouge era – with wooden stilts that support a house entirely made of locally available materials and of least effort – tin sheets for walls which carry a readymade prototype roof just bought off the market. Dwellings in this country reflect their reality, where for some it means a bungalow mimicking the suburban houses of the west (which is viewed a sign of progress and upgrade in status) and for some others it means tin sheets for walls under a readymade roof. The disparity in the kinds of dwellings speak of the aspirations of the locals - dreams caught in between political standing, poverty and power plays.

### **Dwellings as Shape Shifters**

With both these Asian countries having to rise from their ashes, the concept of progress and development is always a sign of reassurance to the citizens, moving away from its past. Infrastructure then becomes a vital catalyst to this progress, in making the dwellings accessible and in enabling a livelihood to thrive, thereby stabilizing a country on political and economic levels. What started as the absolute basic need for the citizens of both these countries has taken shape into becoming enablers and shelters for the lives they seek. The extent of this enabling is then dictated by policies, governance and political environment. Japan has catapulted itself to a stage where it can afford to look beyond urgent necessities and indulge in experimentation while Cambodia is still a fledgling looking to take off.

Dwellings are then seen as shapeshifters, taking on various roles across countries, subject to the economics, politics and governance that shape it. They become the staging ground for life itself, allowing generations to run their course through them, each looking for a life better than they've known.

- 1- Merriem Webster Dictionary definition of 'Conflict'
- 2- Colin Priest (2011) The volumes of violence: representations of conflict through spatial art practice in England, *The Journal of Architecture*, 16:1, 89-98, DOI: [10.1080/13602365.2011.547019](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2011.547019)
- 3- Brigitte Piquard & Mark Swenarton (2011) Learning from architecture and conflict, *The Journal of Architecture*, 16:1, 1-13, DOI: [10.1080/13602365.2011.557897](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2011.557897)
- 4- David Fedman; Cartographic fade to black
- 5- 40 Years After the Fall of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia Still Grapples With Pol Pot's Brutal Legacy; Article on Time Magazine's Website originally published January 7, 2019; Retrieved on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019
- 6- A.Boraine, *A Country Unmasked: Inside South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001). On the concept of 'truth' in

architecture see A. Forty, *Words and Buildings* (London, Thames & Hudson, 2000), pp. 289–303.