

Art projects bring heritage of the White Building back to life

By Claire Knox



Residents of the White Building enjoying the artwork on display in the space as part of the Cambodian Youth Arts Festival, which runs until Friday, Nov. 16, 2012. Photograph: Andy Jones/Phnom Penh Post

This film is a piece of my memory... and I have a lot of strong memories of this place – of artists, circus performers, famous comedians – my mum is an artist and lives here,” Sok Chanrado says, nodding at one of 11 TV sets screening vivid snapshots of community life.

Nineteen-year-old Chanrado has lived in Phnom Penh’s iconic White Building — a now dilapidated structure flanking the edges of the Tonle Sap, originally built in the 1960s as part of revered architect Vann Molyvann’s elaborate revamp of the Bassac area — for most of his life.

Cambodian Youth Arts Festival: The highlights

November 13:

Curator Vuth Lyno will talk audiences through the exhibition Damnaer Thmey (New Journey), a group collection featuring young Khmer artists that blurs the line between traditional and contemporary art, at Cambodian Living Arts from 5:30-6:30pm. On display until November 30. Free

November 14:

Popular Battambang circus troupe Phare Ponleu Selpak (PPS) perform Sokha! at the Chenla Theatre, 6:30-8:30pm. Tickets 10,000 riel (\$2.50) for adults, 5,000 riel for children and students.

November 15:

Workshops held from 1:30-5pm at Wat Koh high school, with classes in circus arts with PPS performers. Also featured: wedding music, yike, traditional dance and smot (traditional Khmer poetry/music). Free

November 16:

Closing ceremony: a shadow puppetry show, a play, a contemporary dance performance, break-dancing and a chapei duo at Chenla Theatre, 6pm. Tickets 10,000 riel for adults and 5,000 riel for children and students.

Almost 500 modern, alabaster apartments, designed by Lun Ban Hap and Vladimir Bodiensky, were erected by the government to house low-income civil servants.

The building was only partly full when the Khmer Rouge evacuated the city, but after the regime's fall people filtered back. Now it teems with more than 2500 inhabitants: the poor and unemployed, drug dealers and prostitutes, noodle vendors, motodops, cleaners, artists and their families, Chanrado says from a small room on the first floor.

His own interpretation of life in the White Building is part of Snit Snaal – a collaboration between the community's NGO-run Aziza school, the Sa Sa Arts Project team and filmmakers Koam Chanrasmeay and Martin Potter. It is part of the Cambodian Youth Arts Festival, on show in the capital until this Friday.

Another level up, the Sa Sa Arts Project team rent a studio and exhibition space, teaching mixed media – photography, visual arts, installation and drawing – every Sunday to students from inside and outside the building.

As part of the festival, 20 Sa Sa students have exhibited their works. The collection includes photographic observations of everyday life in the building, ethereal and abstract paintings of the Khmer Rouge and installations expressing the community's fears of eviction.

Curator Vuth Lyno says given the site's history it was important to foster a contemporary arts culture within the building.

"It was a home of mostly performing artists who worked at the National Theatre and in other cultural departments after the Khmer Rouge... we were told they were called back to mobilise resources and see who had survived.

"We want to engage residents here to use creative mediums to talk and discuss and generate ideas. It's inspiring, there's so much going on in here, there's a hive of activity... it's self-functional, like a small city... it's a matter of how can we sustain this community so that the people here are living comfortably too."