



The Reclamation and Development of Boeung Kak Lake in Phnom Penh an interactive digital poster and eBook spine

Elegant French colonial carte de Phnom Penh, ca. 1925, population <30,000

Cultivate Understanding Multimedia + Digital Conservation Facility, Laos

No question that throughout monsoonal Asia, preservation of urban waterways is a very tough sell.

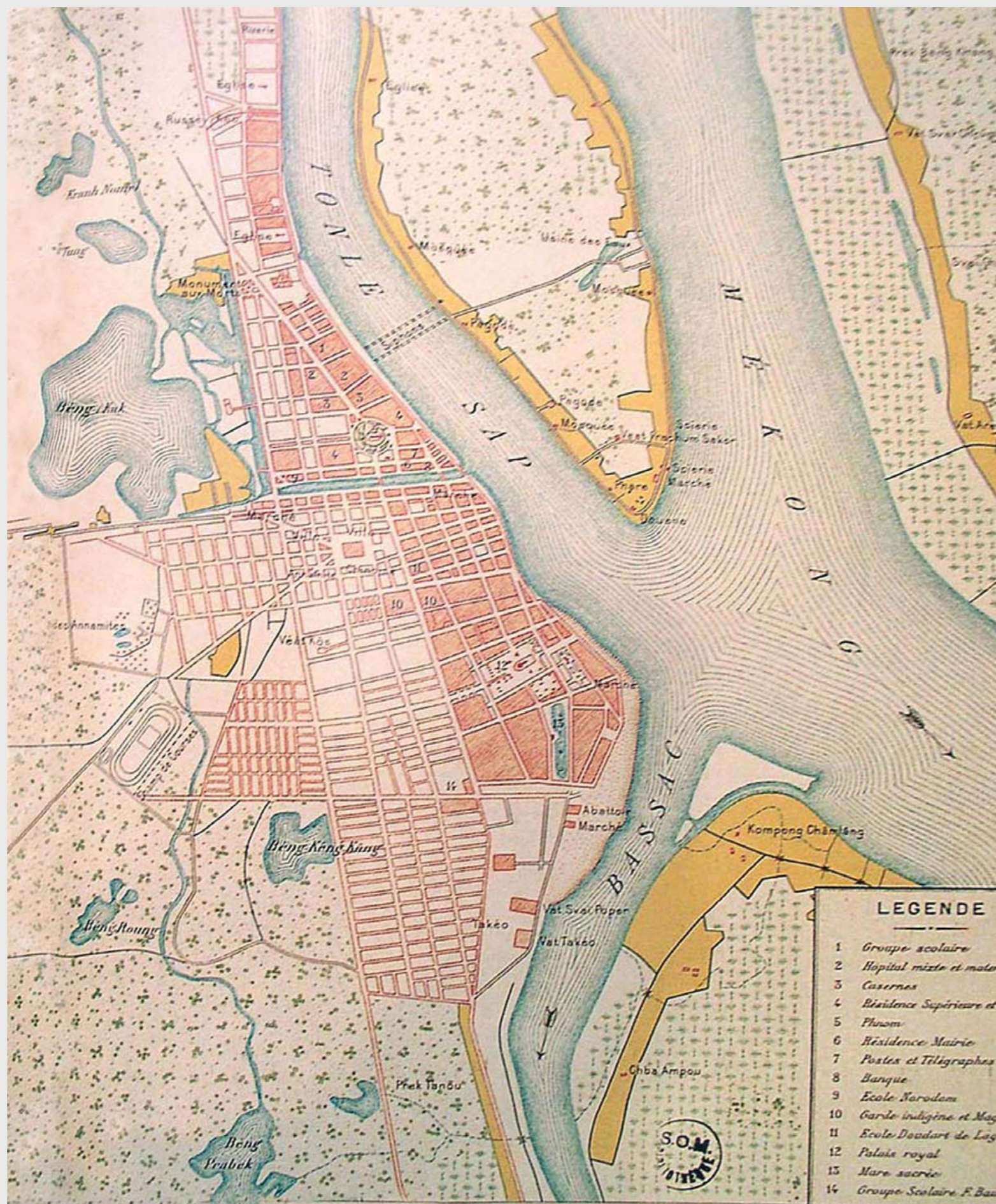
Boeung Kak was the largest urban wetland in central Phnom Penh, and as recently as a decade ago was mostly still semi-pristine and a potential first-order urban amenity. Which was how the French colonial *paysagistes urbains* evidently envisioned it in the post-WW1 city planning maps and the as-built water management infrastructure of that era, which involved a scenic canal, ca. 250 m. in length, in the center of a landscaped grand boulevard linking Boeung Kak to the Tonle Sap river just above the Mekong confluence.

While there was some considerable interest and activism amongst the NGOs in a environmental conservation scheme for Boeung Kak, and the most recent (December, 2010) Google Earth image for the site shows it about 70% filled with hydraulic dredge spoils, it is –in fact– completely filled now, with something on the order of four million cubic meters of hydraulically-pumped fine river sand.

From 2009 through 2012, as many as 10,000 residents of the Boeung Kak lake area, were involuntarily relocated “to build luxury flats and high-end shops for the developing firm, Shukaku, owned by a senator from the ruling Cambodian People’s party” in partnership with first Inner Mongolian, and later Yunnanese entrepreneurs.

Yet in mid-2012, while the “reclamation” phase is mostly completed, the Chinese pile drivers and cranes brought in to establish the basic building footings for new construction, lie idle and rusting. Have the investors gotten cold feet? Is the market for high-end residential, office and commercial real-estate bottoming out? Is there a plausible recovery foreseeable in the mid to near term?

How were the actual planning decisions taken which led to the transformation of Boeung Kak; what was the degree of transparency in the giving-over of the site to Shukaku; were credible environmental and social impact assessments required/performed; and how did the Cambodian and International media report on all these events?



Satellite image of Boeung Kak (February 2003), showing extensive occupancy of shorelines by then already entailing informal reclamation of c. 15-20% of historical lake surface area, population 1.35 million. Source: Google Earth.



Rendering by the Shukaku project proponents of the built-out full development, occupying ca. 130 ha of the former Boeung Kak footprint.



“03-CAMBODIA Takhmau (Kandal) 17/09/2008: Residents of the Boeung Kak community under imminent threat of eviction appeal to Prime Minister Hun Sen and his wife Bun Rany to intervene. VU2008069H0095.tif.” ©John Vink. Source: http://www.johnvink.com/johnvinksite/Cambodia_Stories/Cambodia_Land_Issues/099_Cambodia_Boeung_Kak_Lake_Eviction/index.html#VIJ2010018H0426/ See also: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/quest-for-land/id520997749?mt=8/>



Official site signage for the Shukaku Boeung Kak landfill, erected by the Phnom Penh municipal government and showing the initials of the specific agency personnel authorizing the project.



Exemplary large-scale wetlands reclamation and development schemes — presently under construction, or having received planning agency approval — in greater Phnom Penh: population (2012), ca. 2.5 million.