



# Understanding Angkor:

## From Stones to Stories at a World Heritage Site

by Jane Clark Chermayeff with Julia Rousakis

**Jane Clark Chermayeff**  
is President and **Julia Rousakis**  
is Senior Associate of Jane Clark  
Chermayeff & Associates, LLC.  
They may be contacted at  
[info@jcca-nyc.com](mailto:info@jcca-nyc.com).

**R**ichard Saul Wurman, the “information architect” and my first boss, used to say, “The only way to communicate is to understand what it is like to not understand.” It is at that moment, he said, that you can help make something understandable.

I found myself at such a moment in late 2004 when I arrived at Angkor, the UNESCO World Heritage site in northwest Cambodia. At the time I thought my job there was to communicate to an ever-growing number of visitors the significance of Phnom Bakheng and Preah Khan, two archaeological sites being conserved by the World Monuments Fund (WMF). I discovered that what had to be communicated most urgently was the importance of communicating with visitors in the first place.

### Introduction to Angkor

The archaeological park of Angkor encompasses a constellation of temples and other sacred sites built by Khmer kings from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries. Angkor has always impressed its visitors—from the Chinese diplomat Zhou Daguan, who arrived there in 1296 and chronicled Angkor’s royal pageantry, to the French naturalist Henri Mouhot, whose travel journals, published posthumously in 1863, described monuments overgrown with trees and vines—a romantic vision that popularized Angkor in the West. Mouhot described the main temple, Angkor Wat, as “grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome” (Osborne, 2000, p.60).

Under the French, who controlled Cambodia from the 1860s until the end of World War II, Angkor became the workshop of adventurers and archaeologists as jungles were cleared

and temples stabilized. (Like the antiquities of Greece and Rome, many artifacts from Angkor’s temples ended up in European museums.) Civil war halted conservation in the 1970s, and the four-year reign of the Khmer Rouge brutally suspended any chance for Cambodian scholarship or professional engagement with the site. In 1992, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) embarked on an ambitious plan to safeguard and develop Angkor. Working under UNESCO’s auspices, international groups—from Japan, India, France, Germany, and the United States—have adopted different approaches to site conservation at the hundreds of temples throughout the vast archaeological park, spread out over an area equal to the City of Paris.

The focus of the extensive work carried out by conservation and archaeological teams had, naturally, been on the stone construction. These groups faced an urgent set of troubles: landmines, unchecked pillaging of artifacts, and building collapse. In December 2004, WMF asked me to join a team of conservators and cultural landscape specialists to help deal with a new challenge—people.

By 2005, annual visitation at Angkor surpassed one million, a number that doubled the following year, and was projected to continue growing (Piore, 2006). The tourist infrastructure in the nearby town of Siem Reap expanded apace, with an enlarged airport and luxury accommodations. But when millions of feet began to tread on Angkor’s stones, UNESCO and the other non-governmental organizations found themselves flat-footed. Very few knew how to handle logistics, from parking buses to providing basic tourist

information, much less how to communicate the site's stories and contemporary meaning.

Phnom Bakheng, for example, one of the sites now being conserved by the World Monuments Fund team, had been declared “the most threatened temple in Angkor” due to a brutal combination of heavy rains in monsoon season and unchecked tourist traffic every sunset. At 4:00 p.m. each day, some 3,000 tourists would arrive at the base of the temple-mountain, only to tumble back down twenty minutes later. Tour buses unloaded, and a throng would race to the top to get the best spot for watching the setting sun light up Angkor Wat. Most visitors were unaware that the narrow staircase they had just trampled had been constructed over a thousand years ago for use only by high priests and the god king. Our challenge was to use interpretation to support site conservation.

The timing of my arrival in Cambodia was fortunate: my associate Jill Gilmartin and I had come to work during a seismic shift, from thinking solely about monuments and stones to thinking of people—visitors and communities—and the natural setting itself as resources. As interpreters, we wanted to uncover layers of communal memory preserved in tales, legends, and place names. At Angkor we collected as much of this information as possible to present the role the site plays in people's lives today. And, indeed, people are connected in very tangible ways.

We did not have quick solutions, but we did have a way to approach the challenges—one that began, as Ricky Wurman might have said, with understanding what is not yet understood.

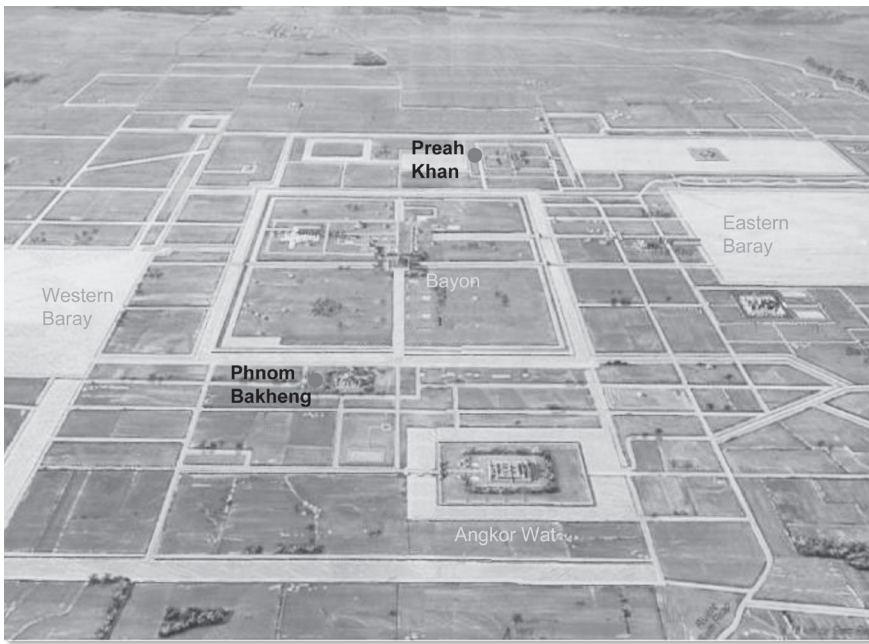


*The two-story pavilion, Preah Khan. Courtesy of JCC&A.*

### **1. Seek Out Collaborations: You Can't Do It Alone**

At a site so vast, it's clear immediately that you need friends. Nothing that lasts can be accomplished by working alone. And so we began to talk to people—as many as possible from all quarters. We took elephant rides with the U.S. ambassador who oversaw the State Department grant supporting our work with WMF (and who advised us to “never ride on the second elephant”). The French had a long-established presence at Angkor, so we teamed up with one of the oldest research groups there, the *École Française d'Extrême Orient*, and its more recent counterpart, the Paris-based *Association des Amis d'Angkor*. With the University of Sydney, we held a community meeting on “Living with Heritage.”

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Richard Saul Wurman



Map of Angkor illustrating key sites including Phnom Bakheng, just above Angkor Wat, and Preah Khan. Courtesy of JCC&A.

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The UNESCO charter for Angkor called for the creation of a governing body, known as APSARA, the Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor and the Region of Siem Reap. My engagement at Angkor came just as the leadership of APSARA was maturing and developing a greater independence. Internally, APSARA was expanding its staff by selectively recruiting young people from across the country—becoming a kind of university for resource management. We all had a lot to learn.

Our first project was to develop a comprehensive plan for Phnom Bakheng. Built as the state temple by King Yasovarman around 900 AD, Phnom Bakheng is distinctive because of its shape—a kind of three-dimensional mandala, or cosmic map. It was the last of the key monuments in Angkor Park to benefit from international aid, and so it became the first where interpretive planning actually developed hand-in-hand with conservation.

Our interviews with scholars and specialists showed us that the primary experts on Phnom Bakheng were not communicating with each other. With the cooperation of WMF and APSARA—and after a blessing by monks from the local wat, or temple—we convened the two-

day Scholars Workshop on Phnom Bakheng in December 2005, with proceedings published by the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap. For the first time in Angkor, local and international experts came together to talk about more than just conservation. Archeologists and historians mixed with horticulturalists and hydrologists, and also with educators and marketing specialists. From APSARA we invited officials and their young teams from diverse departments, who began to see that all of their work—not just Tourism, but also Monuments and Archaeology and Water and Forestry—affects the visitor experience of Angkor. The workshop provided a critical foundation for a multidisciplinary approach to interpretation and management at Phnom Bakheng. It also put a formulated plan in place, easing the flow of State Department funding and APSARA approvals.

These collaborative conversations made clear to everyone how interpretation and site stewardship can work together. Instead of a path straight to the top of Bakheng Mountain we talked about creating a perimeter trail and waysides that interpret the monument together with the surrounding agricultural landscape, in use today much as it had been in the tenth century. At the top “conservation in action” panels would explain the work in progress to stabilize the temple structures.

**2. Facilitate Dialogue: Ask, Listen, and Repeat**

Some 40,000 people live within the bounds of Angkor Park. Yet their knowledge and interests have rarely been considered in the management of the park's resources. They have had little say in decision-making. Working with top APSARA officials, we held community meetings and asked: What are the stories of

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this place? What are the important themes to present to the tourists who are arriving in ever increasing numbers?

Village chiefs, monks, shopkeepers, schoolteachers, and the district governor described Angkor as an active agricultural community and spiritual center to hundreds of thousands of Cambodians—a home, not a romantic relic. What we heard would be familiar to most museum professionals: Visitors should slow down. Then, they could understand that these places are specially designed as sacred spaces—that the structures themselves have meanings. Then they might recognize that our lifestyle today is a continuation of what they see depicted in the reliefs that adorn the temples. Angkor was not “discovered”—we never left!

Preah Khan, our next WMF site, was a case in point. The 138-acre complex, about one-third the size of Central Park, was built in the late twelfth century by King Jayavarman VII, who ruled Angkor at the height of its grandeur. Preah Khan was a walled city with thousands of inhabitants working to support a Buddhist temple at the center of the complex. To conservationists, Preah Khan officially has been preserved as a “partial ruin,” but in reality Preah Khan and the adjacent neighborhoods are active places. Our plan was to replace the dim and dusty visitor center at Preah Khan with an updated space that presents the site’s story with greater historical depth and contemporary context. Most important was a collaboration with our Cambodian colleagues to facilitate a model process and plan for the future interpretive centers within the park.



Crowds atop Phnom Bakheng await the sunset. Courtesy of WMF.

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During one of our eventual ten trips to Siem Reap, in June 2005, we began talking with WMF's professional staff about the project and their recommendations for engaging the adjacent communities of Laing Dai and Sas Sarang. Sitting on the steps at the existing visitor center, a team architect explained the vital importance of nature within the park. She described how the rice harvest is bartered with fishermen of the Tonlé Sap, the large freshwater lake near Siem Reap that feeds into the Mekong River. Several of the staff expressed the desire for a place to tell their children their own stories of the forests surrounding Preah Khan, where as orphans under the Khmer Rouge they would hoard chun lou berries, still growing at the site, to survive. Because of these discussions, our exhibition team included a medicinal garden and trail in plans for the new visitor center, to be designed with community input and APSARA support.

### **3. Make Space for the Community, Space to Dream**

When we started working in Angkor, many sites suffered from a kind of crusty colonialism that set the Cambodian character firmly in the past. The spirit of the new team with our consultation was to present authentic interpretation of both the past and the current culture. The new Preah Khan Visitor Center, which opened in 2008, includes a Community Gallery with an area for local craft demonstrations and musical performances. (Three local orchestras play regularly in the villages surrounding Preah Khan.) The gallery's opening exhibition featured images by Mak Remissa, a Cambodian photojournalist whom we commissioned to spend two weeks chronicling daily life in the villages around the temple. At the opening, a young security

guard, examining one of the colorful portraits, recognized his aunt at the center of the frame.

We also have plans to model Preah Khan—using digital 3D techniques to demonstrate and interpret the site in its “full glory.” When I presented this concept to APSARA with one of the model's creators, Michael Winckler from the University of Heidelberg's Institute of Scientific Computing, the power of this interpretive tool at Angkor had an immediate effect. Bending down as if to peer through a miniature doorway, APSARA's deputy director general, exclaimed, “Marvelous!” He advised us not to make the model too technical, to preserve the sense of awe one feels at Angkor. “You must leave space for people to dream,” he said.

### **4. Plan Ahead to Improvise**

In preparing to work at Angkor, we had anticipated depending on the local office of our sponsoring agency, WMF. But we were newcomers to Siem Reap, and the expat staff had been installed at the site for over a decade. Our work was not their priority and may have felt like an outside imposition. When our “home base” brushed us off, we learned to make our own introductions and to devise our own operating systems. We handed over our crisp U.S. one-dollar bills for photocopies made while gnats buzzed in the fluorescent bulbs overhead. We found the most reliable Internet connection: at the Blue Pumpkin café, where you could download while getting the lowdown on development projects from other NGOs.

In Cambodia, the most common form of transportation is a tuk-tuk, a motorcycle with a canopied trailer for passengers. For us, tuk-tuk taxis also served as our main mode of communication. Without the amenities of an

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office, we soon learned the benefits of showing up in person. Our M.O. was a regular tuk-tuk route that included diplomatic stops at the APSARA department offices of Tourism, Monuments and Archaeology, and Water and Forestry.

Perhaps our most unexpected act of improvisation will be our most enduring work at Angkor. During the third mission, we were waiting for the WMF to finalize its Memorandum of Understanding with APSARA. Without this formal understanding, we had no authority to continue meeting with the necessary department directors to accomplish our tasks. In the midst of our frustration, we received a request from APSARA's director general. He had heard from the department heads on our regular tuk-tuk stops. They were convinced of the power a multidisciplinary approach would bring to the visitor experience of Angkor. He was intrigued, but we were unsure how the meeting would go.

Gathered in the heat of his office, we reflected on our time talking to so many people who live and work around Angkor. Something we had come to understand was the living connection to the past. For the Khmer, responsibility to ancestors is of paramount importance in the present. We explained that interpretation is more than providing information. For us, it is communication aimed at making meaning. Part of the meaning of Angkor, we understood, was as a place of living heritage.

The director general responded by creating the Interpretation Advisory Committee. This was the first-ever working committee on interpretation at Angkor, bringing together an unprecedented group of department



*"Living with Heritage" community meeting, June, 2006. Courtesy of JCC&A.*

heads, staff, and advisors to develop models for an integrated approach to interpretation and visitation at the park. For the inaugural meeting in June 2006, invitations went out to three "Excellencies" from the various APSARA departments and ministries. Seven Excellencies showed up. We had to improvise to meet protocol, rearranging the room to accommodate seven chairs at the head of the table.

Now an established forum, the committee ensures inclusive and representative involvement in important decision-making about the visitor experience—and as a result, about long-term site management. It helps planners and site stewards to look beyond the needs of conservation to include the needs of the visitors and communities.



The opening of the Preah Khan Visitor Center, December 2008. Courtesy of JCC&A.

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**5. Keep Up the Conversation (And Don't Skip Breakfast)**

The archeologists and conservators may be the last to come around. I recently returned from the University of Heidelberg, where I participated in a workshop about Angkor, entitled “Archaeologising” *Heritage? Local Social Practice Vs. Global Virtual Reality*. Participants represented an eclectic mix—archaeologists, stone conservators, scientific computing experts, and one interpreter—from Cambodia, Europe, and (in my lone case) farther west.

For the first few sessions, we struggled with vocabulary and meaning. Technical terms and ingrained thinking in each of the individual disciplines had to be wrestled into a common lexicon and mutual understanding. The best work at conferences often happens outside “business hours.” Over breakfast on the last

day, some members of the group began to shift their attention from the monumental to the contextual. We began to reframe the vision for heritage preservation—particularly at Angkor—to encompass people and place.

A key realization that emerged was that tourism is a given. The people are coming. We agreed that well-informed and interested visitors are more likely to feel invested in a site and its preservation. So how do we as planners in the twenty-first century prepare to balance the conflicting values of visitor expectations with the physical and technical transformations of the local populations living in the shadow of these sites? Our experience at Angkor shows that interpretation is key to striking this balance—because interpretation, fundamentally, is about understanding and communication. ✨