

Spirit House and Its Relation With House Or Non-House in Phnom Penh

Nadya Agyanata¹, Reviato Budi Santosa²

^{1,2}Department of Architecture, Universitas Islam Indonesia

¹Email : 18512176@students.uii.ac.id

ABSTRACT: *Culture in Cambodia receives much inspiration from the religion they believe. Including one called spirit houses, small shrines that exist in front of Cambodian's house and non-house. It is believed that the spirit houses become the place for spirit to reside in whether it is the spirit of nature or ancestors. This belief has already been developed since Cambodian's ancient temple period by making representations of male or female genitals thus the form of spirit houses itself are developed during times. It has been becoming an emphasis of Cambodian's houses and non-house. Yet there is still lack of research regarding the typology spirit house and the relation between spirit house and the space they are in. Previous research was more explaining about religious context whether it is still relevant or not. By observing and learning through some literature, the data are combined resulting descriptive research. The rules upon how this spirit house is being placed outside the house or non-house is indecisive.*

Keywords: *spirit house, physical relation, visual relation, orientation, placement, size, proportion*

INTRODUCTION

Spirit house has existed since the ancient period of Cambodia beyond Angkorean time when the majority's belief was animism. In fact, it is ubiquitous among the Indochinese peninsula with various types and forms depending on the geographical location. Most of them highlight the respect and honor for the previous spirit of ancestors or even spirit of nature i.e. as trees, rivers. A good spirit will watch over the land and keep the bad spirits away when sheltered and treated well. By building a spirit house on houses, shops, and public places, it is an act of respecting the spirits of previous generations and natures. Since the official religion of Cambodia is Buddhist, it believes that by leaving offerings of food and water will provide the recently deceased with the fuel they need to get to the underworld, where they can await rebirth. Family members place the ashes of the dead into spirit houses seven days after they died, sending them off on their journey to their next life (Sameoun 2019).

Spirit house has clearly required a space in a house showing religious acts of serving the spirits. The way each house responds to that request varies depending on the availability of space and location. To build a spirit house, the Cambodian has several qualifications to be accomplished. It is used to being placed in front of the house as its function to watch and keep the bad spirit away. In the periphery region of Cambodia, the spirit house is placed in the front yard of houses in which they are used to having a larger yard compared to people in Phnom Penh. However, in Phnom Penh with a higher density population and building, the spirit house is placed on the balcony or in front of the store.

Even though the belief of building a spirit house was not started by the current majority religion in Cambodia, Buddhist, the people of Cambodia still practice those

religious acts as a part of their culture because of cultural practice connected a lot with religious beliefs and spiritual realms. The way that Cambodian do cultural preservation can in fact enhance the well-being of their community as culture is used to being a part of identity and by maintaining identity a community will not be lost in their own development. The incredible part is how the newer religion has been compromising the previous act of the people to be adapted on their practices. Meanwhile the purpose of building a spirit house has been slowly shifted because of the meaning that is embedded in spirit houses as religious act does not exist anymore and rather the reason of people buying it is for becoming an ornament. The form of spirit house has been developed during history and nowadays the most common form found is handmade concrete painted with a blinding gold and decorated with images or figurines of gods or animals. In other words the production of spirit house hands over the producer which they commonly commercialize.

Problem Formulation

1. How is the physical relation including orientation and placement between spirit house and the house or non-house?
2. How is the visual relation including size and proportion between spirit house and the house or non-house?

Research Objectives

To describe the physical and visual relation between spirit house and houses or non-house in Cambodia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Rean Teivoda is a prominent structure in Cambodian society, one that exists in the majority of Cambodian homes, businesses, and even Buddhist temples (Baeq, 2012). It is also referred to as a community's spirit house, Neak Ta, and the spirit house for an individual family, Tevada. Ang Choulean, Director of the Department of Culture and Monuments, said the practice dates back beyond Angkorean times thus they are not Buddhist, but rather a hangover from animism. The practices conducted in spirit house consist of three ethical aspects. Those aspects involving respect for parents and the elderly, connecting to the spirits believed to reside beneath the spirit house namely the spirits of dead travelers, the poor, and unborn or dead children, and providing opportunity to publicly demonstrate one's level of dedication and respect for the ancestors.

Such prayers are performed by putting one's palms together and bowing toward the spirit house. Sometimes these prayers are accompanied by the burning of incense, as people believe that their prayers ascend with the smoke from the incense in order to appease the nature spirits, lest they get angry and come inside people's homes to inflict disease or other misfortune, the other belief is that it can provide the recently deceased with the fuel they need to get to the underworld, where they can await rebirth. Another ritual practiced at the spirit house involves giving of different kinds of offerings such as food and flowers. Family members place the ashes of the dead into spirit houses seven days after they died, sending them off on their journey to their next life. The practice of worshipping at the spirit house is common among rural Cambodians as well as many urban dwellers.

The purpose of putting spirit house in the house or non-house is to avoid unwanted occurrences. The relation between spirit house and the building is related to the belief of the people since by keeping the offerings and making prayers, wishes, and honorable requests to the spirits, it is believed that it can facilitate happiness, prosperity, good fortune, and other blessings even prevent natural disasters. The opposite things can happen to people who do not obey such practices.



Figure 1. Spirit House outside The House Source: Google Street

There are commonly two spirit houses that exist in a building, one is the spirit houses outside the house which the role is to ward off the evil spirits who seek to enter thus the spirit must ask permission to come into a house and the offerings assure that at least they enter in a good mood. Another one is inside the house to put offerings made for honoring the gods or spirits in the home. According to Choulean (2000) some rich people just buy the spirit houses to place at their homes more as an ornament than as a religious belief. "They just buy the spirit house to beautify their homes," he said.

The form of spirit house varies differing in each geographical location and ranging from a simple bamboo pole colorfully decorated, to elaborate edifices costing more than \$5,000. While the gold-painted concrete structures often seen in Phnom Penh may now be the ready made standard. The most popular and easily-found-type of spirit house is a handmade concrete painted with a blinding gold and decorated with images or figurines of gods or animals, and ornate miniature temples atop decorative pillars which usually features nagas representing fertility, steadfastness and royalty. It has been being produced by craftsmen throughout Phnom Penh and indeed giving ideas for a good business potential.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is qualitative research to answer problems in a descriptive way. There are two approaches to collect the data, using existing data by gathering the materials from reliable literature sources such as books, articles, etc and both direct observation and online observation by the Google Street view specifically around Phnom Penh with no specific qualification to ensure the information and take documentation. The direct observation was conducted in August 2019. The data are then being analyzed to reflect any possible judgement.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the data collection using Google Street observation, the data consist of one public space, one commercial building (guest house), and eight houses which four of them are shophouses. The spirit house being observed was the one placed outside the house and non-house which the function is to ward off evil spirits in order to not entering the building. Many of the spirit houses are placed on the second storey of the building since the majority buildings in Phnom Penh have two until three storey with also as a use for shophouse.

The variety of physical relation between spirit house and the house or non-house found are the orientation which either directly facing the building or slightly being tilted and the placement which eight out of ten from the building observed having position of the spirit house on the right side of the building yet the rest still can not be concluded due to unsureness of building orientation.

Proving the most easy-found spirit house in Phnom Penh is indeed the handmade concrete with a blinding gold with relatively having the same size no matter the function of the building, either it is a house or commercial building. Since the size is relatively the same thus the proportion of the spirit house is not referring to the building size. For instance even the building with more than three storey functioned as commercial building and the building with only two storey functioned as a house has the same size of spirit house.



Figure 2, 3, 4, 5, & 6. (Left to Right) Case study 01, 02, 03, 04, & 05 Source: Google Street



Figure 7, 8, 9, 10, & 11. (Left to Right) Case study 06, 07, 08, 09, & 10 Source: Google Street

Table 1. Date of Accessed Image from Google Street and Street Address of Case Stud

Time Accessed		Street Address in Phnom Penh
Case Study 01	Accessed on Nov 07, 2020	Wat Phnom
Case Study 02	Accessed on Nov 07, 2020	Preah Ang Eng St. (13)
Case Study 03	Accessed on Nov 25, 2020	Street 265
Case Study 04	Accessed on Nov 25, 2020	Street 122
Case Study 05	Accessed on Nov 25, 2020	Kam
Case Study 06	Accessed on Nov 25, 2020	Street 122
Case Study 07	Accessed on Nov 25, 2020	Street 122
Case Study 08	Accessed on Nov 25, 2020	Street 122
Case Study 09	Accessed on Nov 25, 2020	Kam (Street 265)
Case Study 10	Accessed on Nov 25, 2020	Kam (Street 265)

Source: Author

Table 2. Comparison of Physical Relation Source: Author

Case Study	Building Type	Orientation	Placement
01	Public	Slightly tilted	-
02	Shophouse	Slightly tilted	Right side on second storey
03	Shophouse	Slightly tilted	Right side on first storey
04	Shophouse	Straighly directed	Right side on second storey
05	House	Straighly directed	Middle on upper storey (3rd)
06	House	Straighly directed	Right side on second storey
07	House	Slightly tilted	Right side on second storey
08	House	Straighly directed	Left side on first storey
09	Shophouse	Straighly directed	Right side on third storey
10	Commercial	Slightly tilted	Right side on first storey

When the purpose of establishing a spirit house is shifted from the three ethical aspects to only for beautifying a house or non-house, the perception embodied in the spirit house may also be changed. For instance the placement of the spirit house for protecting a house or non-house will be different with the placement of the spirit house for being a decorative ornament thus the pattern on how it is placed is intricate to read.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Spirit house is a small shrine existed both in Cambodian houses and non-houses commonly found with the form of handmade concrete with blinding gold painted crafted by local craftsmen. This small shrine embodies the character of Cambodian culture getting

influenced by their beliefs. Moreover this act of putting a spirit house for a certain purpose has been being preserved for a long time since the Angkorian period when the belief possessed by the community was animism thus one of the three aspects practiced in spirit house is an opportunity to publicly demonstrate one's level of dedication and respect for the ancestors. Even though the physical appearance of spirit houses has been developing over the time, their existence indeed creates the strong identity as a community or even a country.

Based on the observation in certain areas in Phnom Penh, the rules upon how this spirit house is being placed outside the house or non-house is indecisive. The physical relation specifically the orientation between spirit house and the house or non-house has no certain reference either it is straightly directed or slightly tilted to the building but the spirit house clearly placed by facing toward the building. Moreover the reason behind these two types of orientation has not been found yet thus it needs a wider extent of area being observed. How the placement of the spirit house outside the house is in front mostly on the right side of the building but small number of buildings placing it on the middle part of the building thus there is either no specific reference on the placement or the one that placing it on the middle is an anomaly. In summary, the physical relation between spirit house and house or non-house in Phnom Penh has no specific relation but rather a series of dynamic adjustment upon the rules on how the spirit house originally should be oriented or placed.

For the visual relation of the spirit house with house or non-house specifically on the size and proportion, the size of spirit house found outside the building is relatively the same no matter how tall or big the building is thus there is not any proportion existed on the size of spirit house with house or non-house. Regardless of the size of the building, the size of the spirit house is relatively the same. The reason could be that the production of spirit house is being commercialized by the local craftsman with the same style and size.

REFERENCES

- Bailey, A. (2019, April 24). Spirit houses nourish the souls. Retrieved from <https://www.heifer.org/>
- Chau-Pech Ollier, Leakthina and Winter, Tim. (2006). Expressions of Cambodia: The Politics of Tradition, Identity, and Change. Taylor&Francis e-Library.
- Cullen, M. (2010, July 10). Spirit houses in Southeast Asia: What are they all about?. <https://www.xyzasia.com/>
- Shinjong Baeq, D. (2012). Spirit House: The Practice of Rean Theivoda in Cambodia. *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 44(6), 889-915. doi: 10.1111/bjet.12103
- Spirit house enshrines pre-Buddhist beliefs. (2000, June 23). Retrieved from <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/>