

The UK-based organisation, **Incidental**, have been working in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital city for the last four years, exploring new cultural forms with Cambodian artists and musicians. Founder **David Gunn** outlines *Incidental's Neak Ta* project, and reflects on how *Teak Na* moves from traditional development and exchange approaches, while mapping new forms of cultural creativity and exchange



Artscape Phnom Penh

This is a story about culture. How cultures are shaped and influenced, how they are intertwined with broader regional and global forces. And it is a story of Cambodia, of a country in a period of radical change, in a process of re-negotiating its own cultural identity, its memory and history. And finally, it is a story of experimentation between places and people, finding ways to resist or challenge some of the malign aspects of these forces and keep culture vital, changing and human.

As an individual, I have visited Cambodia many times over the past five years, and have watched as the country rapidly evolved, transitioning from the destruction and poverty of the 80s, accelerating into its own version of modernity. And as I returned more and more I began to see the many forms of influence tied up in that process. Cambodia is a country awash with intervention. Interventions of all kinds, and from many directions. Money and influence from the West, in what Nabeel Hamdi has termed “an international environment dominated by aid conditionality and market protectionism¹” Money from China, in exchange for land and other concerns. The multinationals, making serious inroads into the economy as corporate speculation and opportunism intensifies. And the vast machinery of international NGOs, influencing both policy and the economy in innumerable, complex ways.

Maybe things in Cambodia are not so unique. At a basic level, many of these processes are not dissimilar to

those experienced on the streets of London or Bangkok. But the velocity of change in contemporary Cambodia renders them especially visible: abrupt transformations and stark truths, and a government that is less able, or simply less concerned, to hide the rougher edges and submerged violence of global capitalism.

Nowhere is this issue more clear than the issue of contemporary land rights in the capital. As in so many post-conflict nations, traditional land rights are almost non-existent. In the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodians returned en masse to its capital city, occupying buildings and homes in an *ad hoc* manner that has remained largely uncontested ever since. But as international demand for Cambodian real estate increases, the government has begun selling off vast tracts of land for commercial redevelopment. As part of this process, many residents and whole communities have been summarily evicted from homes they have inhabited for 20 years, often without adequate provision or relocations. Swimming pools and the mirrored offices of international consultancies take their place.

But global politics and power influence the country in more subtle and complex ways, too: through cultural traditions. In what remains a very poor country, financing for the arts comes almost entirely from external sources – international cultural institutions, private sponsorship and an international art market. Whilst such sources inject much needed cash into the Cambodia cultural sector, these investments also drive